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LI teens and energy drinks: a bad mix?

February 14, 2011 by CANDICE FERRETTE /
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Fifteen-year-old Ryan Rottkamp steps off the school bus and heads across the street to a bagel shop, where the cooler is stocked with a rainbow of energy drinks.

Seconds later, the West Babylon High freshman is getting his morning boost from a 16-ounce, black-and-neon-green can of Monster Energy.

By the time his second-period gym class rolls around, he says, he's ready for action.

"Most of the kids are just sitting there dead in the morning," Rottkamp said. "But I'm ready to participate and play."

He's convinced the drinks help him focus, run faster and react more quickly, although he concedes: "Sometimes I'm in class shaking my leg and fidgeting too much."

Caffeinated, nonalcoholic energy drinks like Monster, [Red Bull](#), Amp, Rockstar and Full Throttle have become a multibillion-dollar market aimed at young adults. But that surge also has sparked a national debate, propelled by several high-profile deaths and mounting concerns about health risks.

Efforts to ban them

Officials late last year banned drinks such as Four Loko that combine alcohol and caffeine, after they were linked to alcohol poisonings and deaths. Medical experts have followed with calls for more sweeping safeguards - including government regulation of the mainstream energy drinks.

[Suffolk](#) County lawmakers are debating banning the sale of caffeinated energy drinks to those 18 and younger, and requiring stores to post health warnings. Proponents said the proposed ban, scheduled for a public hearing March 8, would be the first of its kind in the nation.

A report released Monday in the medical journal *Pediatrics* warns that the drinks can cause heart palpitations, seizures, strokes and sudden death in children and teens. Pediatricians should routinely ask patients and their parents about energy drink use and advise against it, the study's authors said.

A growing number of scientists and doctors express worry about the little-known short-term and unknown long-term health risks - concerns the beverage industry dismisses as overblown.

Red Bull response

In a statement, Red Bull criticized the proposed Suffolk ban, noting its drinks are alcohol-free and contain about the same amount of caffeine as coffee.

"The same way it would not be right to ban the sale of soda, coffee or tea to people under 19, it's inappropriate and unwarranted to single out these energy drinks," the company said.

Red Bull, which is based in Austria, said its ingredients meet the [FDA](#)'s safety requirements for consumption "both alone and in combination."

Other energy drink companies declined to comment.

In France, some energy drinks were outlawed in 2004 after a government inquiry was launched when an 18-year-old boy collapsed and died on a basketball court. He had downed a couple of Red Bulls before playing. The same thing happened in 2009 to a 27-year-old man in [Memphis](#) who drank a bottle of 5-hour Energy. A wrongful-death suit filed by the man's family is pending.

Some sporting associations, including the [NCAA](#), test players for high levels of caffeine and guarana, another common energy drink ingredient. As stimulants, both are banned by the association, along with amphetamines, street drugs and anabolic steroids. Jeffrey Reynolds, executive director of the [Long Island Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence](#), supports the proposed Suffolk ban. He pointed to a recent [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) article that concluded that young people who drink large amounts of regular energy drinks are more at risk of using alcohol earlier than their peers, becoming binge drinkers and developing a dependence.

Caffeine in nonalcoholic energy drinks masks the effects of alcohol that young people mix them with, so they feel more alert and in control, allowing them to consume more drinks, Reynolds said.

Researchers at the [Johns Hopkins School of Medicine](#) began pushing for warning labels on nonalcoholic energy drinks two years ago.

The amount of caffeine in the drinks, typically sold in 12- and 16-ounce cans, may range from 50 to 500 milligrams. A 12-ounce can of cola contains about 35 milligrams of caffeine; a 6-ounce cup of coffee packs 80 to 150 milligrams.

Energy drink makers also usually toss in some exotic ingredients, such as guarana and taurine, that experts said boosts the caffeine effects. "Children have less experience with caffeine, so they're likely to be more sensitive when they use a lot of caffeine all at once," said Daniel Evatt, a [Johns Hopkins](#) scientist studying the health and psychological impact of caffeine.

FDA regulation sought

In November, researchers from the University of Texas Health Science Center and in Australia questioned the long-term safety of energy drinks and pushed for FDA regulation. The beverages come under the category of "dietary supplements," which allows them to go without the labeling required of sodas and juices.

The American Beverage Association opposes the proposed Suffolk ban, and said most energy drinks already have warnings for caffeine-sensitive people.

Maureen Storey, the association's senior vice president for science policy, rebutted the concerns raised by scientists and doctors. "There's no evidence to suggest that because somebody is drinking energy drinks that it would lead to other issues that a teen may have," she said.

Dr. Steven Walerstein, medical director at [Nassau University Medical Center](#), said he and other doctors have seen children suffering from palpitations because of excessive caffeine use from energy drinks. "This is a concern," he said, that underscores a need to educate teenagers - and parents - about the risks associated with caffeine overload.

At Bagelicious, the shop across from West Babylon High, owner Ed Bifulco said his energy drink regulars include kids as young as 12 or 13.

"They're not drinking these things because there aren't options," said Bifulco, who would rather see the kids buy cheaper juice cartons. "They drink these things because nobody at home is saying they're bad for them."

REPORT: MORE STUDY NEEDED ON ENERGY DRINKS, KIDS

Energy drinks are understudied, overused and can be dangerous for children and teens, warns a report by doctors who say kids shouldn't use the popular products.

The report, to be published in the medical journal *Pediatrics* on Monday, says energy drinks often contain ingredients that can enhance the jittery effects of caffeine or that can have other side effects, including nausea and diarrhea. It says they should be regulated as stringently as tobacco, alcohol and prescription medicines.

"For most children, adolescents, and young adults, safe levels of consumption have not been established," the report said.

The report's authors, from the [University of Miami](#)'s medical school, want pediatricians to routinely ask patients and their parents about energy drink use and to advise against drinking them.

The report cites research suggesting that about one-third of teens and young adults regularly consume energy drinks. Yet research is lacking on risk from long-term use and effects in kids - especially those with medical conditions that may increase the dangers, the report said.

The American Association of Poison Control Centers adopted codes late last year to start tracking energy drink overdoses and side effects nationwide; 677 cases occurred from October through December; so far, 331 have been reported this year.

Most 2011 cases involved children and teens. Of the more than 300 energy drink overdoses this year, a quarter of them involved kids younger than 6, according to a data chart from the poison control group. The report focuses on nonalcoholic drinks but emphasizes that drinking them along with alcohol is dangerous.

A clinical report on energy drinks is expected soon from the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) that may include guidelines for doctors.

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WHAT'S IN THAT ENERGY DRINK

Popular energy drinks often include large amounts of caffeine, sugar and B vitamins. Here are some other common ingredients:

TAURINE

Amino acid that supports neurological development and helps regulate water and mineral salts in the blood. Available as dietary supplement; touted as athletic performance booster.

Experts' concern: Enhances effects of caffeine, which may cause nervousness, irritability, dehydration.

GLUCURONOLACTONE

Created in the body by metabolism of glucose in the liver. Included in energy drinks because it's thought to fight fatigue.

Experts' concern: Studies on effects lacking.

GINSENG

Long-used as an energy tonic in Asia. In the West, ginseng is being studied for a number of uses, from treating stress to boosting alertness.

Experts' concern: Can cause headaches, restlessness, [high blood pressure](#).

GUARANA

Plant's berries contain up to three times the caffeine of coffee. Popular ingredient in herbal weight-loss pills.

Experts' concern: Combined with other ingredients, may cause stimulant overload.

GINKGO BILOBA

Top-selling herb used to treat conditions ranging from short-term memory loss to depression.

Experts' concern: Studies unclear on effects of extract on humans.

Sources: [Mayo Clinic](#), *New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services*

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