

DART Prevention Coalition

BLOG POST ON ENERGY DRINKS

Boost or Burnout: Are Energy Drinks Safe for Youth? – Expert Advice from RWJBarnabas Health



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Energy drinks have gained popularity over the years, with new brands and seasonal flavors being introduced all the time. Despite their popularity, energy drinks are not recommended as part of a healthy diet.

"We are overwhelmed with beverage options at grocery and convenience stores, making it difficult to choose healthier beverages, especially for children and adolescents," shares **Amy Piacente-Desch**, Senior Prevention Manager at **RWJBarnabas Health Institute for Prevention and Recovery**.

However, unlike other caffeinated beverages, like coffee or soda, energy drinks typically contain higher caffeine levels, high sugar content, herbal stimulants (such as guarana and ginseng), and artificial sweeteners. The combination of these ingredients can pose potential health risks for children and adolescents.

Energy Drinks' Effects on Youth

RWJBarnabas Health Medical Group provider, **Dr. Clare Coda, MD**, Internal Medicine and Pediatrics, shares that energy drinks pose cardiovascular (heart) and neuropsychiatric (brain) health concerns for children and adolescents. She explains, "These drinks can increase blood pressure even in healthy children, and they can unmask underlying heart problems like abnormal heart rhythms."

Due to their high sugar content, energy drinks can also contribute to the risk for obesity, insulin resistance and future diabetes, and cavities. Additionally, the herbal stimulants often found in many energy drinks increase caffeine exposure, and the artificial sweeteners and other additives have unknown long-term effects in children.

Dr. Coda also warns parents and guardians that these beverages can lead to poorer school

performance, including lower grades and increased absences, due to their potential health effects. Additionally, the increased risk for abnormal heart rhythms (arrhythmias) and hypertension makes these beverages a poor substitute for water or low-sugar sports drinks.

Energy Drinks and Substance Use

Energy drinks also pose risks for children's or adolescents' mental health. **Dr. Coda** states, "Energy drinks can increase anxiety, depression, panic behaviors, cause sleep disturbances, and increase risk of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms."

These symptoms can contribute to low academic performance and increase risky behavior, including illicit substance use and problematic social media/internet use. "While energy drink consumption is not directly linked to substance use, we know that individuals often use substances to try to reduce or mask mental health symptoms, which energy drink consumption can increase. And, when a person engages in one risky behavior, it can lower inhibitions and them more likely to engage in other forms of risk-taking."

Additionally, increased social media and internet use can lead to exposure to harmful content as well as detract from healthy participation in extracurricular activities and overall well-being. "The internet and social media are not designed with children in mind. Parents and guardians should be mindful of how much time their child spends on these platforms, the content their child is consuming, and the interactions they are having," shares **Ms. Piacente-Desch**.

Strategies for Choosing Healthier Beverages

Energy drinks aren't just a health concern for children and adolescents; there's a social aspect to it as well. "For kids and teens, part of the allure of energy drinks is the products' design—bright colors, fun names, seasonal flavors," **Ms. Piacente-Desch** shares. These designs can be deceptive for anyone, but especially children and adolescents, who are less likely to check a product's label for its ingredients and nutritional facts.

"There is also a peer aspect to consuming these beverages. Kids and teens see their friends or classmates drinking these beverages in school or during extracurricular activities, and they don't want to feel left out," explains **Morgan Durant**, Prevention Specialist at **RWJBarnabas Health Institute for Prevention and Recovery**. The fear of missing out can be very persuasive, especially for children and adolescents who want to share a sense of belonging with their peers.

In prevention work, the goal is to minimize risk and exposure. Due to the prevalence of energy drinks in our communities, it's very likely that your child already knows at least a few brands by sight, if not by name. That is why parents and guardians must have open and honest conversations with their children about the risks associated with energy drinks. Don't assume your child knows the risks or your expectations if you have not communicated them.

Ms. Piacente-Desch shares these additional tips for parents and guardians:

- Set clear expectations. Communicate what choices you want your child to make and why. Leave room for conversation and questions.
- Stock up on healthier beverages. One of the easiest ways to prevent your child from drinking energy drinks is to simply not buy them. Instead, you may opt to keep flavored waters or low-sugar sports drinks stocked in your home.
- Model good behavior. Children tend to mimic the behavior they see around them. By limiting your own energy drink consumption, you are helping demonstrate better choices for your child.

Talking to your child or teen about energy drinks can also open the window to other substance-related conversations, such as alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs. **Ms. Piacente-Desch** adds, "The goal is always open and honest communication. If your child feels safe when talking to you about energy drinks, they're more likely to open up about other concerns."

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The Effects of Energy Drinks on Your Health

Energy Drinks and Your Health

Energy drinks are not FDA-approved. Energy drink consumption has been linked to increased risk of dehydration and health-related issues, such as increased heart rate, high blood pressure and arrhythmias, due to the high caffeine and stimulant content. The stimulant effects can also cause anxiety and sleep disturbances. Over time, frequent overconsumption can lead to long-term health issues.

Commonly Found Ingredients in Energy Drinks

Energy drinks typically contain a combination of stimulants and additives.

- **Caffeine:** The primary stimulant, found in doses ranging from 80 to 300 mg per serving, sometimes exceeding safe daily limits.
- **Sugar:** High sugar content can cause blood sugar spikes and inflammation. Sugar-free energy drinks still contain high caffeine levels.
- **Taurine, guarana, ginseng, B6 & B12:** Excessive amounts of these ingredients can lead to increased heart rate, high blood pressure and nervous system overstimulation, increasing the risk of anxiety. Prolonged overconsumption may also strain the kidneys and liver.

Potential Harmful Interactions

Mixing energy drinks with alcohol or medication can be dangerous. The effects of energy drinks can mask the intoxicating effects of alcohol. Additionally, consuming energy drinks while on medication can potentially amplify or reduce the effects of the medication.

Energy Drinks & Youth

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children and adolescents do not consume energy drinks. They recommend against drinks that contain caffeine and added sugar, citing that drinking such beverages has been shown to increase the risk of anxiety, hyperactivity and even excessive weight gain, heart disease and fatty liver disease.

Healthier Alternatives to Energy Drinks

Drinking too many energy drinks can cause energy crashes, jitters, headaches and other health problems due to the mix of sugar, caffeine and other ingredients. Some healthier alternatives to energy drinks include coffee, black tea, green tea, coconut water and kombucha.

If you currently drink energy drinks and are concerned for your health, speak to your primary care provider. Visit rwjbh.org/doctors to find a primary care provider near you.

Sources:

www.rwjbh.org/blog/2024/February/easy-ways-to-support-energy-levels-without-a-can/
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10535526/>

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