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Are energy drinks hazardous to your health?

Gina Roberts-Grey and John Egan

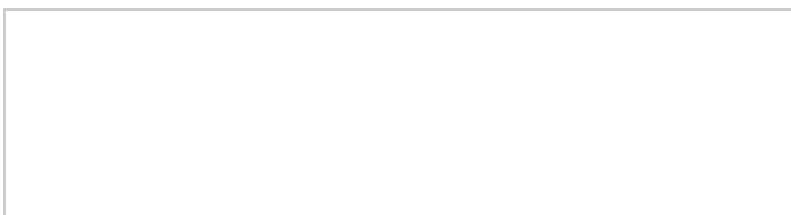
Energy drinks may give you a lift, but they also may give you serious health problems.

From 2005 to 2009, the nationwide number of emergency room visits associated with consumption of non-alcohol energy drinks soared by more than 1,000 percent — going from 1,128 to 13,114. That's according to a study released Nov. 22, 2011, by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The number of such ER visits during that period peaked at 16,055 in 2008.

Nearly two-thirds of the ER visits were made by males, the study shows. Forty-five percent of the visits were made by adults 18 to 25 — a prime age group targeted by energy drink manufacturers.

Studies indicate that excessive caffeine intake from energy drinks can cause bad reactions such as irregular heart rhythm, high blood pressure and dehydration, according to the substance abuse agency. Combining energy drinks with drugs or alcohol increases the likelihood of suffering a serious injury or even engaging in risky behavior like drunken driving, the federal agency warns.

The medical risks connected with energy drinks very well could lead to substantial health insurance claims, as a typical ER visit costs hundreds or even thousands of dollars. And if an



energy drink pushes you down the road toward a drunken driving conviction, your auto insurance premiums could skyrocket.

In defense of energy drinks

The American Beverage Association, a trade group that represents makers of energy drinks, complains that the statistics reported in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration study are taken out of context.

“Of the more than 123 million visits made to emergency room facilities each year, less than one one-hundredth of one percent involved people who consumed energy drinks according to this report,” the association says in a statement. “Even so, this report shares no information about the overall health of those who allegedly consumed energy drinks, or even what symptoms brought them to the ER in the first place.”



From 2005 to 2009, nearly two-thirds of emergency room visits related to energy drinks were made by males, a federal study shows.

Energy drinks are sold in cans or bottles at grocery stores, at bars and in vending machines. Popular brands include Amp, Full Throttle, Monster, Red Bull and Rockstar. These drinks are consumed by as many as half of children, adolescents and young adults, according to the substance abuse administration. Sales of energy drinks climbed 240 percent from 2004 to 2009, research firm Mintel says.

A “serious health risk”?

Energy drinks are flavored beverages containing high amounts of stimulants such as caffeine, guarana (a plant-based stimulant that contains about twice the caffeine as coffee beans) and taurine (an amino acid that helps regulate water and mineral salts in the bloodstream). Those stimulants can create health problems by abnormally revving up the body’s central nervous system and cardiovascular system.

According to the federal substance abuse agency, an energy drink can contain 80 milligrams to more than 500 milligrams of caffeine, compared with 100 in a five-ounce cup of coffee or 50 in a 12-ounce can of cola. Most researchers peg 100 to 200 milligrams of caffeine a day as a moderate amount for an adult, the study says.

“Energy drinks used in excess or in combination with alcohol or drugs can pose a serious health risk,” Pamela Hyde, head of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, says in a news release.

For example, some of the herbal ingredients in energy drinks, such as yohimbe and ginseng, can interact poorly with prescription medication, making the drinks doubly dangerous for the millions of Americans who take prescription drugs, says nutritionist Janet Brill, who wrote the book “Prevent a Second Heart Attack: 8 Foods, 8 Weeks to Reverse Heart Disease.”

Even worse: A study published in the January 2009 issue of the journal [Drug and Alcohol Dependence](#) suggests that energy drinks may serve as a gateway to drug dependence — and that could lead to expensive treatment. Harris Stratyner, regional vice president at Caron New York’s Recovery Center, points out that substance abuse treatment isn’t always covered by health insurance.

Substance abuse treatment generally falls under a health insurance policy’s mental and behavioral health coverage. Federal law prohibits most plans that do include mental health benefits from restricting them too much (by charging higher co-payments than they do for physical health care, for example). But there’s no requirement that an insurer or employer must offer mental health benefits in the first place, leaving some uncovered when it comes to addiction treatment.

Healthy alternatives

Brill cautions that the caffeine, sugar and other ingredients in energy drinks don’t actually provide energy or fuel for your body. They simulate a similar feeling by ramping up the body’s nervous system and pulse — and an energy slump can worsen once the effect wears off.

“When your body works overtime to correct the levels of sugar in your blood and return things to normal, you feel even more sleepy or sluggish than before you had the sugar,” Brill says.

So, what’s a good energy source? Experts say you should put the drinks aside and eat something. Food provides the kind of calories your body needs and engages your metabolism to burn fuel more efficiently, Brill says.

Dr. Carolyn Dean, medical director of the [Nutritional Magnesium Association](#), offers this alternative to energy drinks: “One bowl of oatmeal has fewer carbohydrates, but also has fiber and protein, so it will fuel your body without triggering the telltale ‘energy crash’ you have after consuming large amounts of sugar.”

When all else fails, Stratyner suggests moving around to boost your energy.

“Jog in place, take a walk or do a few stretches to get your blood pumping and give yourself a natural shot in the arm of adrenaline,” he says.

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