Caffeine- the legal addiction

By Stephanie Palmer

Whether your drink of choice is Monster or Rockstar, Jolt or Bawls, you may want to read this before partaking in another can of your favorite boost and/or fix of caffeine. Energy drink companies claim a lot of things when they advertise their products, such as, alertness, improved cognition, increased energy, and so on. However upon researching the information and claims, I found more adverse effects than benefits.

First though I thought you might like to hear that you are not alone in your choice to drink energy drinks, because, well, they are everywhere. With over 800 different kinds to choose from and vending machines and retail places all over campus providing a constant supply of caffeine, they are hard to avoid. But sometimes following the crowd isn’t necessarily a good thing. Based on one study I found, 51% of college student reported drinking one or more energy drinks per month. Of that 51%, slightly more were female. Close to three quarters of that 51% drank energy drinks that contained sugar. According to this study there were 6 main reasons for consuming energy drinks: Lack of sleep or insufficient sleep, to increase energy, using at parties in combination with alcohol, studying or finishing a project, driving for long periods of time, and to treat a hangover. 16-20% of the students surveyed consumed energy drinks for at least 1-5 of the situations, and 7% consumed them for all six. As the number of situations increased so did the amount of consumed drinks. Would you like to hear about the side effects this study reported? Well 29% of students experienced jolt or crash episodes, 22% got headaches, and 19% had heart palpitations [1].

Caffeine and sugar are the main ingredients in most of the energy drinks available on the market. Although these ingredients are fine in moderation, most people don’t consume them that way. With the average can having 100 mg of caffeine per serving, that’s more than your mom’s morning cup of coffee. Caffeine itself is also a stimulant drug and you can build up a tolerance to it, making you need more and more every time to get the same effects of that first taste. It can cause jitteriness, stomach problems, headaches, and sleep problems [2]. Caffeine is a diuretic (making the drinker have to go to the bathroom more often than normal), which can lead to body water loss. It can also make your body loose calcium, which isn’t good
especially for teens and young adults who need all the calcium they can get. Caffeine can also aggravate existing heart and stomach problems (remember those heart palpitations??) [2]. Many cans of energy drinks are actually 2 servings, but they don’t tell you that. So when you think you are getting only 120 calories you are really getting 240, and there are much better ways than an energy drink to get that amount of calories. All these extra calories and sugar just lead to weight gain (and no, guys, not muscle weight gain), if you’re not an athlete and eventually a trip to the dentist. The high doses of caffeine and sugar cause adverse effects of insomnia, nervousness, headaches, tachycardia (increased heart rate), and in rare cases seizures and possible death [3].

Many energy drinks now have additives such as ginseng, guarana, taurine, etc. This is where many of the claims for improved functioning come from. However none of these ingredients are present in enough amounts to cause benefits or adverse effects [3]. To make matters worse most of the cognitive effects of these drinks is due to the massive amounts of caffeine (which far exceed the amounts needed to promote the cognitive functioning) [1,4]. Some drinks claim that the combined effects of caffeine and taurine (an amino acid), have an effect on short term memory retention. This is not the case though. [1]. Some of the additives that are in energy drinks are not even approved by the government, and because their doses are unknown can possibly cause interactions with drugs and other things [2]. The vitamins and minerals that are also being put in aren’t enough for your daily requirements and getting them from a balanced diet and natural sources is always better.

Along with all the health aspects of consuming energy drinks there is also the cost to think about. An 8-12 oz can for three dollars is to me a rip off. You could have trail mix or granola bars and a bottle of water for half that price and you are getting significantly less calories and sugar and way more nutrients. The cost then goes up even more when you are consuming them with alcohol, because alcohol isn’t exactly cheap either.

So, if you are now thinking to yourself I should really lay off the energy drinks and just try to sleep when I’m tired, then good, you were paying attention. However you don’t want to just quit cold turkey. Caffeine is a drug and you have to wean off it like you would any drug (unless you feel you would enjoy the withdrawal symptom......... most people however would
prefer to avoid them). So cut them out one drink at a time and eventually you’ll have cut them out all together. Energy drinks aren’t horrible if they are consumed in moderation and in conjunction with a well-balanced diet. But most people drink them when they haven’t eaten or slept normally in two days and need to stay awake yet another night to study for their physics final at 8am. So my question to you is: why not just get some sleep? It is free after all and you’re body will be much happier!

References


