The Effects of Energy Drinks and Healthy Alternatives
By Robert Adams

“I’m so tired!” “I wish I went to bed earlier last night!” “I’m so tired, I don’t know how I’m going to stay awake tonight and finish that 8 page paper due tomorrow!” Do these quotes sound surprisingly similar to the ones you may say to your family and friends? They may even be things that you say to yourself! If you do, trust me, you are not alone. I too go through this on a semi regular basis in which I am sleep-deprived and need to find ways to stay awake.

Perhaps if you are sleep-deprived, you may be tempted to “party like a Rockstar” or perhaps drink Red Bull to “give you wings.” There are many ways to increase your energy, but one quick, convenient way to get that energy buzz in a relatively short period of time is to consume an energy drink. Energy drinks usually cost anywhere from $1-$3, depending on the brand and size, and are sold at most convenience stores and gas stations. These drinks come in a variety of flavors and colorful cans, usually with some kind of catchy slogan that is designed to promote its incredible energy boost. Buying your desired drink, popping the top off, and chugging may seem like the best way to get that energy you want now, but do you know why that drink is making you go from an exhausted zombie to an alert, jittery, ball of energy? Better question, do you know what it is that’s going into your body, and whether or not it’s negatively affecting your health?

Energy drinks are very similar in content to a can of soda. They both contain caffeine and sugar; however, energy drinks obviously have much more. The average soda may have about 25-40 milligrams of caffeine per can, whereas some energy drinks could have up to 300 milligrams of caffeine per can. Coffee has anywhere from 60-120 milligrams of caffeine in an 8 oz. cup. It is a startling figure to say the least, however, the effects it has on the body can be even more startling. Insomnia, which is inability to fall asleep or remain asleep for an extended length of time, is known to occur if someone were to consume a large amount of caffeine. Heart rate and blood pressure are also affected by large quantities of caffeine, and they both can become so increased that it may potentially lead to an irregular or quickened heartbeat. While this is likely to occur in large doses shortly after caffeine is consumed, these effects have been known to occur in people long after they drank the caffeine. I have had a co-worker
experience this while I was trying to take his blood pressure. His blood pressure is generally normal; however, when I measured his blood pressure one night, it was higher than normal, which could have been classified as slight hypertension. He told me that he had consumed a few coffees that morning; I measured his blood pressure about 9-10 hours after he had even drank the coffees. The effects that caffeine (from energy drinks, soda, and even coffee) have on blood pressure and heart rate can be dangerous if taken excessively and even more so if someone has pre-existing heart conditions. Those with heart problems and conditions should avoid caffeine and other drinks/supplements that could negatively alter blood pressure. Those without heart problems and conditions should drink little or no energy drinks/supplements in order to prevent possible health issues related to energy drinks.

Another major issue related to excessive caffeine consumption includes dehydration. While any energy drink gives someone the energy necessary to get through the day and complete their task, it won’t necessarily provide hydration. Also, if someone is jittery or more active as a result of the extra energy, they will most likely perspire. Unless the person is drinking adequate water, the effects of dehydration may be felt acutely, and even fatal in some extreme cases.

The “crash” that is often associated with drinking large amounts of sugar is quite apparent in energy drinks that are not sugar free, since energy drinks generally contain more sugar than most sodas. Even though this may not appear to be a big deal to one’s health, it can potentially weaken the immune system and even over-stimulate the nervous system. Another negative aspect of drinking energy drinks are an excess in calories, which may cause weight gain. Also, the sugar in the energy drinks can cause cavities, as well as other oral problems.

After reading the negative effects mentioned above, the question running through the reader’s mind may be “so what should I do in order to safely increase my energy?” The good news is, there are many inexpensive things that people can do to safely increase their energy, and some of those options don’t cost a thing! Even better, these alternatives are much safer and healthier to the body in the long run. These alternatives include drinking more water, which can actually make you feel more alert. Also, natural fruit juice, such as orange juice or grape juice with no added sugar, provides vitamin C. The natural fruit juice can also give off an
energy rush, due to the natural sugars. A whole grain snack, such as a whole wheat bagel or whole wheat crackers are other options. The whole grain snacks will be great sources of fiber, vitamins, and minerals, which will make you feel full longer, and are also great sources of complex carbohydrates. An alternative to energy drinks that still contain caffeine are green or black tea. The caffeine content in these teas is low, and even provides the body with antioxidants.

In my opinion, the best way to naturally increase your energy and promote health is to exercise, which fights fatigue and boosts your immune system. There is also a plethora of other health benefits that come with physical activity, such as increased mood and mental focus.

Obviously, sleep is very important in ensuring good health and energy as well, and should never be neglected. However, most of us at some time or another will unfortunately have to lose sleep due to work, school, or other personal matters. In the end, regularly engaging in physical activity, eating a balanced diet with plenty of water, and getting a full night’s sleep will provide you with “wings” that will carry you farther than any energy drink-supplement can.