

Be careful what you drink

Supercharged elixirs not really good for energy boosts

BY CHRIS TRABER
Staff Writer

They're called a buzz in a bottle, a kick in a can.

Energy drinks are legal elixirs, supercharged with sugar, caffeine and exotic ingredients designed to provide a quick boost of physical vigour and mental alertness.

With names such as Red Bull, Red Rave and SoBe Adrenaline Rush, they're increasingly popular with young people and less so with York Region health and sport professionals.

Found on grocery shelves alongside juice, water and sports drinks, energy drinks are over-the-counter jolts for those who want to stay awake and alert or enhance their prowess, athletically or otherwise.

A relatively new phenomenon, they can also make you ill. And, they can kill.

Not to be confused with caffeine-free sports drinks formulated to re-hydrate the body, energy drinks contain excessive caffeine and sugar. A 250 ml can of Red Bull has five teaspoons of sugar and 80 mg of caffeine. That's double the caffeine in most soft drinks and half that found in a cup of coffee. Some energy drinks contain up to 300 mg of caffeine per bottle or can.

Many energy drinks also contain glucuronolactone, a carbohydrate, herbs and taurine. Taurine is an amino acid, one of the building blocks of protein. Some energy drink manufacturers claim taurine increases alertness, but there is no current research to support this.

High doses of caffeine can short circuit your system, causing heart irregularities and palpitations, seizures, dizziness, nausea and vomiting and electrolyte imbalances. Add alcohol to the mix, and, as Health Canada reported nine times in 2007, critical and lethal reactions can occur.

As such, consume energy drinks with caution, York

Region Community and Health Services public health nutritionist Susan Finkelstein said.

"The side effects of too much caffeine can include headaches, jitters, insomnia, irritability and heart irregularities," she said. "If you mix it with alcohol, you've got a depressant and a stimulant together. That can mask the intoxicating effect of alcohol."

One study, she said, showed those who combine energy drinks and alcohol tend to drink more, take more risks and are more likely to experience harmful consequences while drinking.

"If you look at the (energy drink label) fine print, there are warnings," Ms Finkelstein said. "It's really doubtful anyone is reading it because, well, the print is so small."

Most adults can ingest as much as 400 mg of caffeine daily without suffering nasty side effects.

That's the amount in two cups of filter drip coffee. Health Canada stated the stimulant is harder on children, recommending the average 10- to 12-year-old limit caffeine to no more than 85 mg daily, the amount found in one SoBe No Fear.

In addition to the caffeine, most energy drinks contain ingredients that accelerate the effect. Taurine increases circulation. Glucuronolactone is a diuretic and alters mood. The herbal stimulant guarana is loaded with caffeine.

These cocktails, often the over-used staple for kids looking to party late into the night, are also the misunderstood boost of choice for young athletes.

Caffeine's diuretic effect causes frequent urination and even dehydration, public health professionals warn. Energy drinks should not be consumed during or after exercise when re-hydration is necessary. Water is most effective for hydrating the body.

Knowing France and Denmark have banned Red Bull after young athletes who ingested the drink died during competitions, York Region sports coaches aren't fans of energy drinks.



Hockey coach Rick Cornacchia says so-called energy drinks such as amp, Full Throttle and Rockstar are not actually energy drinks he recommends for sports. You might as well toss them away.

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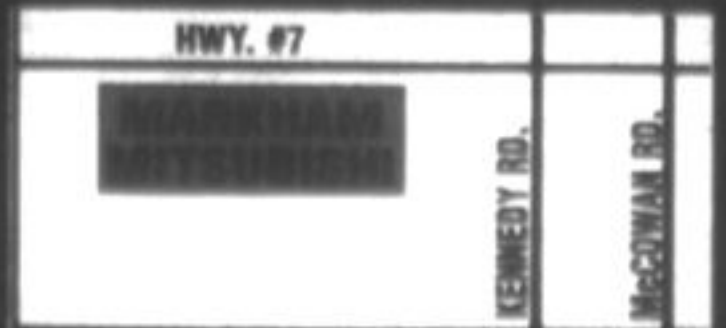
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