

# Are Energy Drinks Safe?

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I am frequently asked whether energy drinks are good for kids. The short answer is a direct quote from the American Academy of Pediatrics— “Rigorous review and analysis of the literature reveal that caffeine and other stimulant substances contained in energy drinks have no place in the diet of children and adolescents.” Not much wiggle room there! If that’s all you want to know, no need to read further. If you’re an inquiring mind, keep reading.

There are several problems with energy drinks including how they “fix” the problem of being tired, the ingredients they contain, the extra sugar includ-

ed, and their potential for abuse. First is the supposed “fix” for being tired. People sometimes ask me whether they need tests because they are tired a lot. They sometimes mention they have tried energy drinks, which only help a little. My first question is to ask them about their sleep habits, which often reveals the source of the problem – not enough sleep. Many are up late on the computer or watching television and then up early for school or work. It’s a basic fact of human biology that we need an adequate amount of sleep, ranging from 7-9 hours in adults to 11-13 hours in preschoolers. We don’t get to choose where on this range we sit. If you have a body that needs 8 hours and you are only getting 7, you will be tired. A little extra caffeine might make up for a short night here or there, but there is no replacement for sleep.

The second problem is the ingredients in energy drinks. Caffeine in coffee or tea is generally safe in reasonable amounts, but energy drinks often exceed these and supplement them with other stimulants like guarana and taurine. Unfortunately, there is little data on safe levels of caffeine consumption in children. In addition, good studies on the safety of guarana or taurine supplements in children (or adults) are lacking.

The third problem is the amount of sugar in many of these drinks, often exceeding several hundred calories per can. The calories we consume in liquid form account for about half of the obesity epidemic, so minimizing this source of calories is essential. The effects of all this sugar on kid’s developing teeth is another major issue!

The fourth problem is their potential for abuse. A

recent trend is to combine these drinks with alcohol, which increases the chances of alcohol overdose. Alcohol alone is a sedative which can sometimes limit the amount one person consumes because they tend to fall asleep. But, the stimulant effect of energy drinks can blunt this tiredness leading to even more alcohol consumption and increased chances of consuming a dangerous amount.

Another evolving issue is the likely addictive combination of sugar and caffeine, with one substance increasing the craving for the other. If kids get started on these drinks early in life, they may be hooked for life!

For kids, the answer is to avoid energy drinks altogether, and likely the same goes for adults.

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