

## What's the Buzz About Energy Drinks?

There are healthier ways to get an energy boost, experts say.

Full Throttle, Rock Star, Monster Energy, Rage, Cocaine, Red Bull -- these are some of the high-powered energy drinks being marketed to young adults. The web sites for these products are full of images of macho lifestyles. They promote beverages containing ingredients that sound scientific, but may be unfamiliar to many consumers.

While we all need an energy boost from time to time, an energy drink may not be the best way to get it, experts say. The FDA does not define the term "energy drink"; that label is up to manufacturers' discretion.

"There is scant scientific support for these ingredients to make the kind of claims manufacturers use in hyping their products," says Suzanne Farrell, MS, RD, a spokeswoman for the American Dietetic Association. "Most of the energy from these drinks comes from the sugar and caffeine, not from the unnecessary extras."

She also points out these drinks contain plenty of calories from sugar, which can add up quickly if you drink a few cans.

Aside from caffeine and sugar, some of the more common ingredients are taurine, ginseng, guarana, vitamins, and green tea.

"Most of the energy drinks contain high-tech-sounding ingredients that are not controlled substances, of no value, and potentially harmful" in large amounts, adds Cynthia Sass, MPH, MA, RD, a board-certified specialist in sports dietetics.

And trying to figure out exactly how much of each stimulant is contained in an energy drink can be difficult, she says.

"The amount of the stimulants is not always listed on the label, and even when the information is listed, it is hard for consumers to interpret because we are not familiar with these ingredients," says Sass.

One ingredient most people are familiar with is caffeine, and "what we do know is that large doses of caffeine can be very dehydrating," says Sass.

While one cup (8 ounces) of strong coffee has about 125-150 milligrams of caffeine and a 12-ounce can of ordinary cola has 35-38 milligrams, an 8.3-ounce can of Cocaine energy drink contains 280 milligrams. In general, caffeine consumption should be limited to about 200-300 milligrams per day, says Farrell.

### Easy to Drink

One of the concerns about energy drinks is how easy it is to drink large quantities of these sweet beverages.

"Energy drinks contain multiple stimulants that, when combined, can be dangerous and have a very powerful effect on the body," says Sass. Most people know how much caffeine they can tolerate, but may not be familiar with the effects of some of the other ingredients.

She describes such possible [symptoms](#) as upset stomach, leg weakness, heart palpitations, being jittery, nervousness, and more. Drink these energy drinks on an empty stomach and the effects can be magnified.

"There will be an energy burst, but it could also lead to agitation, difficulty concentrating, hyperactivity, a problem sleeping, nausea, and affect blood pressure," Farrell says

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### Fuel for Workouts?

Don't be misled into thinking energy drinks will power up your workouts, Sass says.

"If you take an energy drink before [exercise](#), it could increase your blood pressure, over stimulate your heart or nervous system, resulting in a number of potential side effects on your body," she says. "You might think there

would be no risk to drinking an energy drink, but some of these products have powerful, drug-like effects and should not be underestimated."

Her advice: "If you have any medical condition, [hypertension](#), or [heart disease](#), avoid all drinks that have multiple stimulants."

If you want to try an energy drink, she recommends trying a small amount the first time with a meal to see how your body reacts to it. She advises avoiding physical exertion during this trial period.

### Need a Boost?

When you need a boost -- whether to study for a test, prepare for a workout, or just get past an afternoon slump -- there are healthier ways than energy drinks, the experts say. Among the energy-boosters they recommend are a healthy [diet](#), physical activity, and a good night's [sleep](#).

And when you need a quick fix? "Energy drinks sound like they would be better than a latte, but a coffee drink made with skim or soy milk is a much better choice because we know more about the effects of caffeine," says Sass.

They recommend no more than 2-3 servings a day of caffeinated beverages, preferably served along with food. If you find caffeine overly stimulating, try decaf or half-caffeinated beverages.

Other energizing beverages include sports drinks, fruit juices, water, low-fat milk, and good, old-fashioned water. "Drink more water," suggests Farrell. "Being dehydrated can lead to [fatigue](#)."

Also make sure you're getting enough carbohydrates. Fresh and dried fruit, vegetables, cereal, low-fat yogurt, and whole-grain breads are just a few of the many nourishing foods that can give you energy.

Eat meals every few hours, don't skip meals, and take a good look at your eating and sleeping habits, suggests Farrell.

If you're feeling run down, Sass suggests taking a look at the reasons why you are so tired instead of trying to fix it with energy drinks.

"Try to get more sleep or increase your physical activity -- both will help sagging energy levels," she says.

The bottom line is that while energy drinks are not necessarily harmful, many just don't live up to most of the claims they make. Think of them as drinks that are highly concentrated in sugar and caffeine, and drink them with caution.

"We don't need energy drinks," says Sass. "Don't take trendy energy drinks at face value. Question the marketing of these products, and find alternatives that contain ingredients that are known to be healthful."

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