

Main Office
8790 Manchester Road
St. Louis, MO 63144
(314) 962-3456



Branch Office
1723 Pennsylvania Ave.
St. Louis, MO 63104
(314) 664-7550

COMBINING ALCOHOL & ENERGY DRINKS



A common problem among college students and teens is mixing energy drinks with alcohol, a potentially dangerous combination. Mixing powerful stimulants contained in some energy drinks with depressants in alcohol could cause cardiopulmonary or cardiovascular failures, said David Pearson, a researcher in the Human Performance Laboratory and coordinator of exercise science programs. He is the author of “Ask Dr. Dave,” a column for MH-18 magazine and MH-18.com, its online version. The publications are a spin-off of Men’s Health from Rodale Press and are aimed at male teens. “It is scary to think that these energy drinks are being used as a mixer with vodka and whiskey,” he said. “You are just overloading the body with heavy stimulants and heavy depressants.”

Energy drinks are a popular fad among America’s youth culture. With names like Venom, Whoopass, Red Bull, and Adrenaline Rush, energy drinks are being sold by the millions to people looking for a quick boost of energy. Most energy drinks contain large doses of caffeine and other legal stimulants, including ephedrine, guarana, taurine, and ginseng. Such drinks are being marketed to people 30 and younger. “There is a feeling of empowerment after a person drinks one of these,” Pearson said. “It is a real big wallop of legal stimulants. The effects can last up to 12 hours.” Little research has been done to determine if energy drinks are helpful or harmful. The NCAA and some professional sports leagues have banned such stimulants,” Pearson said.

“Because they are legal and sold over the counter, just like cans of pop, kids who have been raised on caffeine-based drinks think that they are perfectly fine,” he said. “We have learned that caffeine can have negative effects by causing a decline in the body’s immune system.”¹

Steve Clarke, Director of the College Alcohol Abuse Prevention Center, said students need to be careful about mixing these energy drinks with alcohol. Fatigue is the body’s way of saying it’s had enough to drink and it’s dangerous to continue to try to fool your body that you’re not as drunk as you really are, he said. “You may feel more alert but actually the alcohol is having the same effect on you. So you might perceive that you are less impaired when in actuality you are not less impaired.”

“High levels of caffeine can boost heart rate and blood pressure, causing palpitations, according to the National Institute of Health. Mixing these drinks with alcohol further increases the risk of heart rhythm problems. Alcohol makes people dehydrated, which is one reason why people have hangovers. The caffeine in energy drinks is a diuretic, which also causes people to lose water, so it makes the effects of dehydration worse. You might feel you can party for a long time, but in reality you are going to have a greater hangover effect the next day,” Clarke said.²

1 Reprinted from Higher ED AOD Prevention Digest, 11/01, Vol. 01:235.

2 Alcohol: Problems & Solutions, www2potsdam.edu/hansondj/HealthIssues/1043185105.html, copyright 2009

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