

# ALERT!

## Energy Drinks and Alcohol



**T**HE SAFETY of energy drinks is once again being called into question. A recent government study estimates that between 2007 and 2011 over 20,000 people sought emergency medical treatment after downing energy drinks.<sup>1</sup> Many of those seeking help had combined energy drinks with alcohol or other drugs. But, more than half of those seeking medical attention were there due to energy drinks alone.

Adding to the concern are numerous complaints filed with the FDA<sup>2</sup> (and at least one lawsuit<sup>3</sup>) that allege energy drink consumption has been responsible for serious health problems including: anxiety, irregular heartbeat, heart attacks, insomnia, convulsions, and even a few deaths. It has not been conclusively proven that energy drinks were to blame for any of these problems. But critics warn of the large amounts of caffeine in energy drinks and the combination of caffeine with other ingredients that act as stimulants. The potential for adverse health effects due to energy drinks likely increases when numerous drinks are consumed in a short period of time.

While the harmful effects of energy drinks alone are still up for debate, the danger they pose when mixed with alcohol is more clear. The caffeine in energy drinks masks the depressant effects of alcohol. At the same time, caffeine has no effect on the metabolism of alcohol by the liver so it does

not reduce the risk of alcohol-related problems. In other words, energy drinks hide the feeling of being drunk, creating a state that is sometimes referred to as “wide awake drunk”.

A wide awake drunk is fully impaired by the alcohol, yet still feels wide awake. The sedated, drowsy feeling normally caused by significant alcohol intake (which to some degree acts as a natural safety mechanism) is removed by the caffeine and other stimulants in the energy drink. In this state the likelihood of poor decision making and risk taking increases substantially versus someone who is drunk from alcohol alone.

Energy drinks also hide the taste of alcohol, which makes it more palatable to continue drinking. Also, because energy drinks obscure the feeling of being drunk, they make it easier to drink alcohol longer and to drink more in a short time. This increases the chances of alcohol poisoning.

According to information compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention<sup>4</sup> (CDC), drinkers who consume alcohol mixed with energy drinks are three times more likely to binge drink than drinkers who do not report mixing alcohol with energy drinks.

Blackouts also seem to be more common among those who mix alcohol with energy drinks. Blackouts are amnesia-like episodes caused by a rap-

id increase in blood alcohol concentration. After a blackout a person has little or no memory of the events that happened while they were drunk.

The CDC also reports that drinkers who consume alcohol with energy drinks are about twice as likely as drinkers who do not mix alcohol with energy drinks to be taken advantage of sexually, to take advantage of someone else sexually, or ride with a driver who is under the influence of alcohol. ☹

### REFERENCES

1. New York Daily News, Jan 16, 2013
2. Los Angeles Times, Nov 16, 2012
3. The New York Times, Oct 22, 2012
4. [www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets](http://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets)

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