Supplements label accuracy faulted again

By ACSH Staff — April 10, 2013

Out of concern that military personnel may be consuming excess caffeine, Dr. Pieter Cohen, from Harvard Medical School and Cambridge Health Alliance, and colleagues from the Uniformed Services University in Bethesda, MD and NSF International in Ann Arbor, MI, investigated the caffeine content of several supplements and compared it to the amount of caffeine listed on the label. Their concern was that large doses of caffeine, particularly when combined with other stimulants, might increase the risk for heat-related injuries.

The investigators analyzed the caffeine content of the most popular supplements sold on military installations that contained caffeine, as well as those that included herbal supplements known to contain caffeine. Of the thirty-one supplements tested, twenty actually listed caffeine on the label, and five of those products caffeine content were either much lower or higher than the labeled amounts from 27 to 113 percent. In fact, only nine of them contained between 90 and 110 percent of the amount listed on the label. Further, six of the 20 supplements that listed caffeine as an ingredient, didn’t provide an amount; all of these provided over 210 milligrams per serving. Eleven supplements included caffeine-containing herbal ingredients, but didn’t list caffeine on their labels.

For comparison, the authors noted that soft drinks may not include more than 71 milligrams of caffeine per 12 ounce serving.

The authors concluded Given the lenient legal framework and inaccurate labels, military personnel are unable to determine if a supplement can be safely combined with other products or foods containing caffeine.

ACSH’s Dr. Ruth Kava noted This lack of accuracy can be directly linked to the 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act (DSHEA) that allows supplement producers to market their products without first supplying safety information to the FDA. Consumers and their physicians should be aware of these issues when they consider using caffeine-containing supplements whether present as natural herbal ingredients or as added caffeine.

ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom maintains that the entire caffeine-energy drink campaign is one giant marketing scam. You can read his 2012 op-ed entitled Red Bull ___ ___ here [2].