Energy Drinks: The Dose Makes the Poison

By Ruth Kava — February 5, 2016

Energy drinks, those that contain caffeine in relatively large amounts, are already popular with young people especially young men and the attraction is growing.

U.S. sales of these beverages increased by 60 percent between 2008 and 2012. But physicians, in particular cardiologists, have noted an increasing number of energy drink consumers turning up at emergency departments with symptoms of cardiac distress such as palpitations (fast or erratic heart beats). According to the CDC, such visits rose rapidly between 2007 and 2011, and common symptoms, particularly when energy drinks were combined with alcohol, included feeling jittery, and trouble sleeping. The agency notes that about 31 percent of 12-to-17 year-olds, and 34 percent of 18-24 year-olds, consume energy drinks regularly. While a cup of coffee can contain on average 100 mg of caffeine, an energy drink might contain five times that amount.

A new survey from Australia authored by Drs. Maureen Busuttil and Scott Willoughby from Lyell McEwin Health Service, South Australia and the University of Adelaide and Royal Adelaide Hospital, respectively, reports that of 60 people presenting to the emergency department of a South Australia hospital with palpitations, 42 had consumed energy drinks, compared to 18 who had not done so.

In addition, of the 17 individuals who presented with chest pain, 13 were energy drink consumers, and over 20 had consumed at least one energy drink in the 24 hours before showing up at the hospital. Of those patients, eight had consumed more than five such drinks in the previous 24 hours, and one person had consumed 12 with alcohol. All the patients were between 15 and 39 years old, and 28 were male. Similar numbers of consumers and non-consumers had family histories of some type of cardiac issue such as arrhythmia or ischemic heart disease.

Even more concerning is the consumption of beverages that contain both alcohol and caffeine these caffeinated alcoholic beverages (CABs) were first introduced in 2002, and by 2008 their...
sales had increased over 60-fold. Consumers of these CABs are more likely to binge drink than non-consumers.

"People are unlikely to slam down seven espressos one after the other," said Dr. Ian Musgrave [5], a colleague of the authors, "but people are more likely to especially under the influence [of alcohol] misuse energy drinks in that way."

So, one might well consider these drinks as unregulated drugs entities that have definite effects on the body. And when you add alcohol to the mix, the issues get even more complicated even if the interaction is simply a disinhibition of drinking more than one might normally do.

If you're looking for a lift from a caffeine-containing energy drink, be aware of the possible downsides, especially if heart problems run in your family. And keep the consumption to a moderate level.

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