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HEALTH ANSWERS

The Boston Globe

Are 'energy drinks' bad for you?

January 29, 2007

They're not going to kill you. But many of these increasingly popular drinks contain significant amounts of caffeine, which can make you jittery and cause insomnia, as well as loads of sugar, which nobody needs. Worse, these drinks are often marketed to kids and teenagers, many of whom already struggle with their weight and don't need to add a caffeine addiction. "Energy drinks are rip-offs," said Bruce Silverglade, legal director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a Washington, D.C.-based consumer watchdog group that has been trying, unsuccessfully, to get the US Food and Drug Administration to force manufacturers to list the amount of caffeine on product labels.

In a study published last year in the Journal of Analytical Toxicology, Bruce A. Goldberger, director of toxicology at the University of Florida College of Medicine, tested the caffeine content of 10 energy drinks, including Red Bull, Red Devil, and Hair of the Dog.

In most energy drinks, he said, caffeine levels were higher than the FDA limit for sodas, which is 65 mg of caffeine per 12 ounces. The FDA does not regulate caffeine in energy drinks, some of which, like Cocaine, contain huge amounts of caffeine: 280 mg in an 8.4-ounce serving, compared with about 100 mg per 6 ounces in coffee.

Overall, caffeine "is relatively benign and is not associated with life-threatening health risks," said psychopharmacologist Roland Griffiths, a professor in the department of psychiatry and neuroscience at Johns Hopkins University and a caffeine expert. "But here it is being promoted in the form of energy drinks and, alarmingly, in many cases to children and adolescents," Griffiths said.

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Caffeine can increase anxiety, panic, some stomach problems, and some cardiac arrhythmias. Although some data suggest that drinking coffee can be good for you, "we should not mistake coffee or caffeine as a health food," Griffiths said.

JUDY FOREMAN

Please e-mail health questions to foreman@globe.com. ■

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