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Are energy drinks over-energized?

At various times this year consumer activists, researchers and elected officials have challenged the soft drink industry, blaming it, at least in part, for an obesity epidemic among children in the U.S. (See "Report: Beverage market volume grew by 3.2 percent in 2005," in the April 20, 2006 *NPN MarketPulse*.)



Now a different beverage segment, energy drinks, is coming under the scrutiny of health experts, who say that the beverages contain ingredient amounts that could have detrimental effects if consumed in quantity.

The Food and Drug Administration should enforce stricter standards for "energy" drinks and other so-called functional foods, the nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest said Dec. 5 at a hearing convened by the FDA.

"Many so-called 'functional foods' would be more aptly named dysfunctional foods," CSPI legal affairs director Bruce Silverglade. "Many 'energy' drinks, for example, primarily consist of water, sugar and caffeine. But the food industry is pressuring the Bush Administration to extend already weak standards for dietary supplement ingredients label claims to these newfangled products. That approach would make functional foods a potentially useful idea, about as dependable as 19th century snake oil."

CSPI, based in Washington, D.C., testified that some drinkers mistakenly rely on "energy" drinks to mitigate the effects of alcoholic beverage consumption. Drinkers may expect a placebo effect and dangerously assume that they can drive a car, or drink even more alcohol without becoming further inebriated, according to the CSPI.

CSPI also told the FDA that medicinal herbs don't belong in foods like iced tea and that snacks with unhealthy amounts of saturated fat are inappropriate mediums for ingredients that purportedly reduce the risk of heart disease.

"To ensure safety and effectiveness, companies should be required to notify the FDA before adding novel ingredients to foods for purported health benefits," said CSPI staff attorney Ilene Ringel Heller, who also testified at the FDA hearing.

In 2000, the U.S. Government Accountability Office strongly criticized the FDA's failure to protect consumers from unproven ingredients and claims. A GAO report concluded that "FDA's efforts and federal laws provide limited assurances of the safety of functional foods..." The report made numerous recommendations to the agency, including requiring manufacturers to place warning labels on some products.

Despite the passage of more than five years, the FDA has failed to implement any of GAO's recommendations. During that time, the annual sales of functional foods have rocketed and now, by industry estimates, exceed \$25 billion per year.

Products highlighted by CSPI at the FDA hearing included:

- **Enviga:** This new carbonated drink from a Coca-Cola/Nestle partnership claims thanks to a combination of caffeine and an antioxidant found in green tea, the product burns more calories than the drink provides and implicitly promotes weight loss, CSPI said. The Center said that on Dec. 4 it notified those companies that it will sue them if they continue to make those claims—which it said are based on inconsistent, short-term and industry-funded studies.
- **Rockstar energy drink:** The label promises that after drinking the 16-ounce can one can “party like a rockstar.” The beverage contains an “energy blend” of ginseng (an herb investigated for treating cirrhosis), two forms of caffeine, ginkgo (an herb investigated for improving memory in Alzheimer patients), and taurine, an amino acid.
- **DanActive “Immunity” dairy drink:** This Dannon product claims to help “strengthen your body’s defenses.” But the only actual study conducted on people found that DanActive didn’t prevent illness and 25 percent of the participants had to cut their dose in half because they suffered bloating, gas and nausea, according to the Center.
- **Monster Energy drink:** The beverage contains five types of added sugars (54g in a 16-ounce can, about the same as a Coke), two sources of caffeine, and some natural enzymes and digestive acids. The label states “We went down to the lab and cooked up a double shot of our killer energy brew. It’s a wicked mega-hit that delivers twice the buzz of a regular energy drink.”
- **Tab Energy low calorie drink:** In an effort to remake this 1960s diet cola, Coca-Cola has added guarana extract (a source of caffeine authorized for use in foods as a flavoring), vegetable juice (for color) and B vitamins. B vitamins convert protein and carbohydrates into energy, but do not provide an energy boost that is felt by the body, according to the Center. The product also contains the amino acid taurine and L-carnitine, a co-enzyme naturally found in the body.

The *New York Times* reported Dec. 12 that nearly 200 new energy drinks have hit store shelves since January, according to the market research firm ACNielsen. Leading brands are Red Bull, Rockstar and Monster. Energy drinks are a \$3.7-billion industry whose revenues have increased by 51 percent in the past year alone, *The Times* reported, Red Bull is the third-largest source of beverage profits in convenience stores, according to one recent market survey.

This year, in a study published in the *Journal of Analytical Toxicology*, a team of researchers analyzed the caffeine content of 10 popular energy drinks and found concentrations as high as 141 milligrams per 16-ounce can. While the Food and Drug Administration does not regulate the amount of caffeine in soft drinks, agency guidelines for colas suggest no more than 68 milligrams per 12-ounce serving.

Only four of the drinks carried caffeine warnings on their containers, the researchers noted, and none suggested a limit.

“The caffeine content really should be listed on the labels,” the lead author, Bruce A. Goldberger, a toxicologist at the University of Florida, told *The Times*. “Caffeine may be the most widely used drug in the world, but certain people need to avoid it.”

Among them are those with high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease and certain anxiety disorders, as well as pregnant women.

Perhaps more troubling, Dr. Goldberger said, is that there is little scientific research

how high intakes of caffeine affect adolescents over the long term. Caffeine is difficult to abuse; unpleasant side effects appear even at modest doses, and toxicity occurs on very high doses. Those who overconsume it are usually teenagers or young adults.