

Energy Drinks' Punch Stronger Than Ever

Caffeine levels too high for kids, health experts warn

By: Howard Cohen

Miami – Energy drinks charged into the U.S. market in 1997 with Red Bull and its claim: “Improves performance... increased concentration... stimulates the metabolism.”

At 66.7 mg of caffeine per 8.3 ounce can, that would be a mere blip in the bold new world of energy drinks. A cup of coffee, by contrast, has 107.5mg.

Today, provocative handles like Cocaine (since changed to No Name, owing to a 2007 FDA ruling against naming a product after an illegal drug), Blow, Bawls, Monster, Rockstar, Pimp Juice, Dopamine, SoBe No Fear and Spike Shooter abound. Caffeine counts of 350milligrams – the equivalent to 10 cans of Coke – are common. The slogans scream: “Feel the freak.” “Get Spiked!” “Party Like a rockstar.”

The \$2-per-can drinks buzzed \$4.7 Billion in sales in 2007, up from \$3.5 billion in 2006, according to market research firm ACNielsen.

The drinks, with their high caffeine content, have caused concern among health professionals – especially when kids consume them. Studies have linked excessive caffeine in children to elevated heart rates, hypertension, anxiety, headaches, and interrupted sleep patterns.

Last month, four students at Falcon Cove Middle School in Weston, Fla., were taken to the emergency room of Memorial Hospital West/Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital with racing hearts and body sweats. They said they shared a can of Redline.

“We have been seeing lots of kids coming in with anxiety attacks – it has gone up in the last year and a half,” says Dr. Deanna Soloway, assistant medical director of the pediatric emergency room at Hollywood, Fla.'s Joe DiMaggio Children's Hospital.

“One of the routine questions we ask them in about their intake of energy drinks. Many kids are using them. I believe there is some connection between the use of energy drinks and hypertension, elevated heart rate, jitters. We had to monitor these four kids for several hours and put them on hydration.”

The Florida Poison Control Center at the University of Miami/Jackson reports that 39 people ages 2 to 20 had symptoms of caffeine overexposure between January 2007 and March 2008. The signs were serious enough that it led to the center's tracking of this data. Statewide, the number was 125 during this period.

“It's grown because of the popularity of these products,” said Dr. Richard Weisman, the center's director.

Taurine, first isolated from ox bile by Austrian scientists in the 19th century, and guarana, another form of caffeine, are also common additives.

Redline's bottle contains a warning that it's not for use by individuals younger than 18, those pregnant or nursing, or if there's a family history of heart disease, high blood pressure, depression, caffeine-sensitivity, glaucoma and other ailments. Monster, Rockstar, Spike Shooter and SoBe No Fear contain similar warnings. Miami based Bawls' website suggests moderation for consumers who fit any of these profiles.

The Food and Drug Administration regulates the caffeine content in soft drinks, but not in energy drinks. For colas, the FDA has set the maximum concentration of caffeine at 32.4 milligrams per 6 ounce bottle or 65 milligrams per 12 ounce. “The FDA could challenge such products but we have generally refrained to do so if amounts to be

consumed were not higher than the levels consumed from coffee,” FDA press officer Stephanie Kwisnek says. An 8-ounce coffee, in general, contains about 100mg of caffeine. “If there is a public health risk with energy drinks or with any other beverage, FDA will take the appropriate action deemed necessary to protect the public’s health,” she adds.

The attention surrounding the Weston incident prompted the Broward, Fla., School board members to consider banning energy drinks from school campuses. This potential move was welcomed by Davie, Fla.-based Redline CEO Jack Owoc, who has offered the district \$25,000 toward enacting the ban. Owoc feels that minors should not be taking these drinks.

Pediatricians agree.

“There is no real therapeutic benefits associated with these energy drinks,” said Dr. Steve Lipshultz, chairman of the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. “If you’re a 200-pound adult, and 8-ounce bottle of something that contains 250 mg of caffeine may not be a big deal, but if you weigh 60 pounds and are getting the same dose” it’s a problem. “We dose medicines based on weight and size. Caffeine’s a medicine and nobody has done anywhere the clinical studies needed.”

The University of Florida’s Department of Pathology, Immunology and Laboratory Medicine conducted a study analyzing the caffeine content in energy drinks and other beverages. Publishing their work in March 2006 edition of the Journal of Analytical Toxicology, researchers concluded that “there are important health concerns that cannot be ignored with regards to the amount of caffeine contained in these drinks.”