

Energy Drinks and Caffeine Drinks: Are they safe for you and your children?

SANDY HAGGARD – NUTRITION, FOOD SAFETY, AND HEALTH AGENT

With their brightly colored cans, sweet flavors, and bold marketing campaigns aimed at teens, energy drinks may appear harmless. But according to Kansas State University Extension Nutrition Specialist Chelsea King, the caffeine inside tells a very different story.

King recently discussed the growing popularity of energy drinks on a weekly KState Extension program, noting that consumption continues to rise among teens and young adults. Despite their appeal, she said these beverages often contain high levels of caffeine, added sugars, and other stimulants that can pose health risks — especially for younger consumers.

“Children 12 and under should not be consuming any caffeine,” King said, explaining that developing bodies are far more sensitive to stimulants. For adolescents, she recommends keeping intake low. “Kids ages 12 to 18 should limit caffeine intake to 100 milligrams per day — roughly one small cup of coffee.”

Adults, she added, have a higher threshold. “A healthy adult can safely consume up to 400 milligrams of caffeine per day.” Even so, King emphasized that many energy drinks can exceed recommended limits quickly. A single can may contain 150 to 300 milligrams of caffeine, not including additional stimulants such as guarana or taurine, which can intensify caffeine’s effects.

King said she often hears misconceptions about where caffeine comes from. “People will ask me about their kids eating chocolate, but chocolate only contains about 5 to 10 milligrams of caffeine, which is not a concern,” she said. The real issue, she noted, is the surge of high-caffeine beverages marketed with bright packaging and promises of improved performance or alertness.

Health experts have raised similar concerns. A Harvard study found that highly caffeinated drinks may be harmful for individuals with heart conditions or high blood pressure. While an occasional energy drink or daily cup of coffee is generally safe for most people, King said moderation is key — and relying on energy drinks for energy can create unhealthy habits.

Instead of turning to caffeine for a quick boost, King encourages healthier, longer-lasting strategies for improving focus and fighting fatigue. These include drinking water, eating balanced meals, taking movement breaks, and getting adequate sleep. Unlike energy drinks, she said, these habits support steady, sustainable energy rather than a short-lived spike followed by a crash.

As energy drink marketing continues to target younger audiences, King hopes families will stay informed and talk openly about caffeine use. Understanding what’s inside the can, she said, is the first step toward making healthier choices. Increasing water consumption is recommended.

For further information on nutrition programming such as Cooking for 1-2, Dining with Diabetes or Planning Family Meals, please contact Sandy Haggard, Nutrition, Food Safety, and Health Agent, Southwind District, SJHaggard@ksu.edu or 620.365.2242.

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