Sober Talk Article for July 2009

Energy Drinks Carry Unexpected Risks

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Energy drinks have been integrated into our culture since the 1990's. An energy drink is defined as any beverage that contains legal stimulants and/or vitamins, added for the specific purpose of giving the consumer a short-term boost of energy. Many people do not realize that these popular drinks, such as Red Bull, contains significant amounts of sugar and caffeine.

Caffeine is a mild stimulant found in cola, tea, coffee and chocolate. While its effects are milder than amphetamines and cocaine, caffeine is an addictive drug that uses the same mechanisms as those to stimulate the brain. A plain brewed 8 ounce cup of coffee contains 135 mg of caffeine, while sodas range from 22 mg (Barq's Root Beer) to Coca Cola Classic's 34 mg, Diet Coke's 45 mg to Code Red Mountain Dew at 55 mg of caffeine. A Starbuck's Coffee Grande 16 ounce contains 259 mg of caffeine. Most energy drinks have 70-200 mg of caffeine.

Energy drinks such as Sparks, Tilt and Rockstar 21 are marketed like the energy drinks they are, with one major ingredient difference: they also contain alcohol. In fact, their alcohol content ranges from 6-10 percent. Marketing strategies for these products mimic those for selling non-alcoholic energy drinks popular with teenagers and college students.. High school students have reported that they keep alcoholic energy drinks in their rooms because their parents don't recognize them as alcoholic, even though their contents are clearly labeled.

Often, "natural" substances are included as ingredients which can give a consumer a false sense of health and safety in consumption. For example, the seed of the guarana, a

climbing plant native to Brazil contains approximately three times more caffeine than coffee beans, and has stimulant properties that increase the metabolic rate. Ginseng is often three different herbs (Asian or Korean ginseng, American ginseng, and Siberian ginseng) commonly grouped together and called ginseng. Known adverse effects to the use of excess ginseng include: headaches and elevated blood pressure, especially if combined with caffeine or alcohol.

The combination of energy drinks and alcohol carries a number of risks. Alcohol is a depressant, while energy drinks are stimulant. Fatigue is one of the way s the body normally indicates someone has consumed too much alcohol; the stimulant effects of the energy drink can mask how intoxicated an individual really is and give the impression that he is not impaired. No matter how alert a person may feel, the blood alcohol concentration or BAC is the same as it would be without the energy drink. Once the stimulant effect wears off, the depressant effect of the alcohol remain and could cause vomiting in one's sleep or respiratory depression. Dr. Mary Claire O'Brien, in her interview with Julie Chen on CBS Morning show of November 7, 2007 discussed her recent study of over 4000 students on ten different college campuses. Her research indicated that one in four college students mix energy drinks with alcohol with the express purpose of being able to drink more without passing out. . Both energy drinks and alcohol are very dehydrating. Dehydration can hinder the body's ability to metabolize alcohol and will increase the toxicity, and therefore the hangover, the next day. So serious is the combination of alcohol and energy drinks that 29 attorneys general, including New York State's, expressed grave concern in a letter to the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau regarding how these products are targeting youth and

called upon the agency to enforce federal law that says companies cannot market these beverages as “energy enhancing”.

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