

Caffeine Craze

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By TFK Staff

Food and beverage makers are adding caffeine to a growing number of products. Is it safe for kids to consume these products?

You may have heard adults say they can't get going in the morning without a cup of coffee. One reason they may feel that way is that coffee contains caffeine, a substance known to give an energy boost. Caffeine occurs naturally in coffee, tea, and cocoa beans, which are used to make chocolate. But now food makers are adding the stimulant to many products, from popcorn and potato chips to waffles and water. "It's possible for all of this caffeine consumption to add up and become dangerous," says Virginia Stallings, a doctor at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, in Pennsylvania.

The U.S. government is also concerned by the practice of adding caffeine to foods. That's why the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is investigating the health effects of caffeine on young people. Michael Taylor is a spokesperson for the FDA. "We need to look at the science and make some decisions about how to protect people," he told TFK.

The Buzz on Caffeine

Studies show that too much caffeine can cause jitters, inability to sleep, and a racing heartbeat. What's more, caffeine is habit-forming. Those who consume it regularly and stop suddenly may experience headaches and feel irritable and tired.

One of the biggest concerns is the large amount of caffeine added to so-called energy drinks, like Red Bull. A 12-ounce can of cola has about 35 milligrams of caffeine. A similar serving of Red Bull contains more than triple that amount. Emergency-room visits related to energy-drink consumption were up from 10,068 visits in 2007 to 20,783 in 2011.

The Institute of Medicine, an independent nonprofit organization, is working with the FDA on caffeine-safety measures. Stallings is a member of the institute. She says

young children should not drink beverages that contain caffeine. Teenagers should be aware of caffeine's effects on health and on how the brain works. Take, for example, teenagers who consume caffeine to stay awake and study for a test. The effect? Research shows they may remember less of what they just studied.

A Wake-Up Call

Companies that make products with added caffeine claim they do not advertise them to kids. However, there is no law to stop children from buying them.

So what can be done to protect young people from the harmful effects of caffeine? Michael Jacobson, of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, says the FDA needs to set limits on caffeine, especially in energy drinks. As for added caffeine in foods, he says, the government should just say no. "Caffeine is a mildly addicting drug that should not be distributed randomly throughout the food supply," Jacobson told TFK.

At the very least, Jacobson argues, the amount of caffeine should be printed on food labels to alert consumers. Taylor says the government may do that. But first it needs to judge the safety of added caffeine in food and drinks. After it does that, it will decide the appropriate levels of the stimulant for different age groups.

Doctors say kids should avoid caffeine. If you need extra energy, try these natural boosters instead: eat right, exercise, and get plenty of sleep.