

Energy drinks causing people to frequent emergency rooms

Publisher's note: *"I found a total of three patients in 2012 who had diagnoses containing the words 'energy drink' or 'red bull' or 'caffeine' – the last one was thought to be due to the effects of '5 hour energy'. So not unheard of, but certainly no epidemic here," Warren Withers, medical director for Barton Memorial Hospital Emergency Department, told Lake Tahoe News.*

By Doug Podolsky, Consumer Reports

On these short winter days, some people might find themselves eyeing caffeinated energy drinks for a little boost. But perk up your ears: Emergency room visits for problems related to energy drinks have risen sharply, particularly for people age 40 and older, according to a government study out last week.

The number of ER visits involving energy drinks doubled overall from 10,068 in 2007 to 20,783 in 2011, according to the latest data from the Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN) a public health surveillance system that monitors drug-related hospital emergency department visits.

In each year from 2007 to 2011, more males than females went to the ER for energy drink-related care. And there were more patients age 18 to 39 than in other age groups. Notably, the largest increase was seen among people age 40 and older, for whom ER visits jumped 279 percent, from 1,382 in 2007 to 5,233 in 2011.

Fifty-eight percent of the energy drink-related ER visits in 2011 were for adverse events associated with the sole use of energy drinks. The remaining 42 percent involved energy drinks in combination with pharmaceutical drugs such as the central nervous system stimulants Adderall and Ritalin, alcohol, or

illicit drugs including marijuana.

“Consumption of energy drinks is a rising public health problem because medical and behavioral consequences can result from excessive caffeine intake,” the report says. “A growing body of scientific evidence documents harmful health effects of energy drinks, particularly for children, adolescents, and young adults.”

Older adults may also be vulnerable to adverse effects associated with energy drinks, the authors indicated, possibly because they take medications or have medical conditions. The findings were published Jan. 10 in the DAWN Report.

In response, the American Beverage Association, a trade association based in Washington, D.C., issued a statement this week pointing out that the report does not provide data on the overall health of the patients, what symptoms brought them to the ER, or their overall caffeine intake.

Bottom line: Large amounts of caffeine can cause adverse effects such as insomnia, nervousness, headache, fast heartbeat, and seizures that are severe enough to require emergency care, according to the government’s DAWN report. See our Ratings in Consumer Reports to find the caffeine content of 27 top-selling energy drinks and shots. And read our recent blog about the Food and Drug Administration’s safety review of energy drinks. If you experience adverse events you believe may be related to energy drinks (or other FDA-regulated products) ask your health care provider to report it to the FDA’s MedWatch Adverse Event Reporting Program or report it yourself.