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LIVING

TODAY: THE HEALTHY LIFE

ARE ENERGY DRINKS A RESPONSIBLE
PICK-ME-UP OR FOOL'S FUEL?NUTRITIONISTS SAY IT DEPENDS ON HOW
YOU USE THEM.Canned
HEATBy Molly Kimball
Contributing writer

Jennifer is a typical teenage achiever, juggling academics, athletics, community work and a social life, often at the expense of good eating and sleeping habits. But she has a secret power source to keep her going.

The 17-year-old New Orleans high school student, who asked that her last name not be used, says she downs an energy drink "pretty much any time I need to be 'on,'" including before school, before workouts and during long stretches of homework.

"It helps me focus so much more, take better notes, and I remember what I learned even better," she said. "I don't fall asleep, I don't miss anything. If I'm cramming and stay up all night, I'll have an energy drink that morning before my test. . . . I feel like it can mean the difference between an A and a C."

It can also backfire. Sometimes, after mixing energy drinks with coffee and caffeine pills, "my hands are shaking so much I can't fill in the Scantron

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Energy drinks: Good for you or fool's fuel?

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ubbles" on the test answer sheet, Jennifer said. And once, after downing an energy drink before a spinning class, "I felt like my heart was coming out of my chest. My heart rate was 228 beats per minute. I was freaking out!"

Therein lies the essential energy drink dilemma. The caffeine-powered not-so-soft drinks have definite benefits: a short-term energy boost and, in some cases, heightened mental focus. But they are no substitute for a well-rounded diet and can have negative, and in some cases serious, side effects when consumed in large quantities or mixed with other stimulants.

"Energy drinks can be used safely in controlled servings, to give an energy boost when needed," said Steve Roch, a registered dietitian in private practice in New Orleans. "My fear, however, is that people might abuse them, with the idea that if one drink is good, three must be better."

"A person can develop a dependency on these drinks, and require more and more to get that lift."

Though dominated by Red Bull — among the first, and most popular, brands — the energy drink market has expanded rapidly and now includes dozens of varieties with edgy names such as Amp, Bawls, Jolt, Rockstar, Sobe Adrenaline Rush and Who's Your Daddy.

Though flavors and additives vary from brand to brand, the common core ingredients are caffeine and sugar. Most have about 80 milligrams of caffeine per eight ounces. That's about the same as coffee, which has 65 to 135 milligrams of caffeine per cup, but more than a regular soft drink, which has 35 to 55 milligrams per 12-ounce can. Some brands crank up the intensity by adding as much as 250 milligrams of caffeine per serving and packing in additional energy-revving ingredients such as guarana, glucuronolactone, yerba mate, green tea, and N-acetyl-L-tyrosine.

"Consuming these multiple stimulants can cause a person's adrenal glands to go into overdrive," Roch said. "The heart rate increases, blood pressure goes up, vessels enlarge. There is an increased blood flow through the body, causing a person to experience that rush, or buzz."

Heightened awareness also can occur. Taurine, an ingredient common to many energy drinks, is an amino acid that has been shown to improve mental performance, including attention and verbal reasoning skills.

Like any nutritional shortcut, this one comes at a price. Many energy drinks contain 200 or more calories per serving, with multiple servings per can — enough to wreck a person's weight management efforts.

Are energy bars any better?

Unlike energy drinks, whose high caffeine content raises a red flag for many consumers, energy bars sound like a sensible choice for an afternoon pick-me-up: portable sources of calorie-dense, high-carb fuel that provide a quick burst of energy.

Most nutritionists agree that they're ideal if you're engaged in an activity that will burn a lot of calories quickly — backpacking in a national park, for instance. Eating an energy bar before the hike can provide the muscle fuel that a hiker needs on the trail.

But the most hiking that the average American does these days is moving from house to car to desk, with minimal physical exertion. There's no need for easy-to-carry, calorie-packed sources of food — especially when many of these energy bars aren't much more than candy bars in disguise, says Yvette Quantz, registered dietitian at Telos Fitness Center in Dallas. Though they pack added vitamins, minerals and

protein, these additives are usually not enough to counteract the negative effects of often vast amounts of sugar.

The "energy bar" category can encompass many types of bars, ranging from granola bars to cereal bars to sports nutrition bars. In fact, according to U.S. Department of Agriculture food labeling guidelines, the word "energy" on a food package simply means "calorie."

Is it possible to incorporate these convenient, portable snacks into a healthful diet, even if you're not trekking through the wilderness?

Absolutely, as long as you select the right type of bar. Look for bars with a lower sugar content — that is, fewer than 8 grams of sugar — and at least 3 grams of fiber per bar. And be mindful of calories: If it's a "meal replacement" bar, use it as such, not as a snack. If you just want something sweet, you may be better off with a treat that's lower in calories, such as a small portion of chocolate candy.

— Molly Kimball

ist with the Heart Clinic of Louisiana.

Taking energy drinks on top of caffeine pills, cold medications or diet pills, Cospolich said, can increase the risk of adverse reactions, which include tachyarrhythmia (rapid heart rate), increased blood pressure, sleep disturbances, anxiety, nausea and headaches.

"It's especially a concern for people with pre-existing cardiac problems," he said.

Energy drinks that contain herbs such as ginseng pose an additional risk, Cospolich said, because they may interfere with prescription drugs such as anticoagulants, diabetes medications, diuretics and antidepressants.

Though there has been little formal research into the impact of energy drinks on the body, the beneficial effect of moderate caffeine consumption on exercise is well-documented. Studies have shown that consuming caffeine before and during training can decrease the perceived level of exertion, which means the person feels less tired, which may translate into enhanced athletic performance.

Charlie Hollinger has experienced the energy drink advantage firsthand. The 37-year-old competitive athlete pushes himself hard to prepare for triathlons, and sometimes he fuels his extended training sessions by adding a half-can of Red Bull to each bottle of his carbohydrate-electrolyte replacement drink.

"I feel like it makes me go stronger, longer and feel better overall," he said.

something he encourages, however:

"If a person has a good diet, they don't need an energy drink to make it through just one hour of weight training," Hollinger said. "But if someone's skipping meals and snacks and they come in dragging, they'll run over to the convenience store to grab an energy drink for a quick fix."

The quick fix can be followed by a fast fall: Caffeine's diuretic effect increases the risk of dehydration and muscle cramping, and the heart can race almost out of control.

"A person's heart rate increases naturally with exertion," Cospolich said, "and will rise even faster after consuming energy drinks."

For many young adults, an el-

evated heart rate is a desirable side effect during a night on the town, which is why energy drinks have become the cocktail mixer of choice for 20-somethings.

"People will mix energy drinks with pretty much anything," says Matt Alleman, general manager of the nightclub Republic New Orleans. Red Bull and vodka is the top seller, he said, but also popular is the "Jager Bomb": a shot of Jagermeister liqueur in a taller glass of Red Bull.

Cospolich urges party animals to proceed with caution. Energy drinks can be "especially dangerous when mixed with alcohol," he said. The combined dehydrating effects of caffeine and alcohol can make for industrial-strength hangovers. And because the energy drink keeps the body from getting as fatigued as a normal cocktail, the brain may not register the message that you've had enough to drink.

"The stimulant effect," he said, "can make people feel like they're better off than they really are."

The same can be said for energy drinks in general: They provide short-term energy in a can but lack the long-term power of a diet that has the proper balance of proteins, carbohydrates and liquids.

For optimal energy, Roch recommends consuming at least 80 ounces of fluid per day; taking a basic multivitamin (with iron for pre-menopausal women, without iron for men and post-menopausal women); and incorporating one to two servings of whole grains at every meal.

"Like energy drinks," he said, "whole grains are high in B vitamins and carbohydrates. But they contain fiber-rich carbohydrates, which means they provide a more steady, slow-releasing energy. Eating a meal or snack every three hours — as well as staying well-hydrated — will help maintain optimal energy levels."

Molly Kimball is a registered dietitian in New Orleans.

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