



ENERGY DRINKS: WHAT A BUZZKILL

ENERGY
&
ISSUE

WORDS GEORGIE LANE-GODFREY

T

here are some situations in which the maxim 'fake it till you make it' will always

prove worthwhile: flailing your limbs in the front row of dance aerobics, feigning confidence when meeting new colleagues and dusting extra icing sugar on to a shop-bought Victoria sponge for the office bake-off. But trying to replicate the kind of energy you get from a solid eight hours' sleep and superior nutrition by guzzling a can of flavoured

carbonated liquid doesn't have the same clout. Because while energy drinks probably saw you through countless late nights and early mornings while you navigated higher education and the Jägerbomb is a stalwart of bar tabs everywhere, they're no match for the real thing. And unlike *actual* energy, which keeps you going for longer, the more of these drinks you sup, the less of an effect they have on the body, so you're forced to quaff more and more to get the same buzz.

Last year, the UK government proposed a ban on the sale of energy drinks to under-16s, citing them as one of the main contributing factors in childhood obesity due to their high sugar content. According to the Department of Health, 'evidence suggests that excessive consumption of energy drinks by children is linked to negative health outcomes such as headaches, sleeping problems and irritation, as well as depressive symptoms, emotional difficulties and lower wellbeing'. Similar health effects may apply to adults, says Kawther Hashem, registered nutritionist and one of the Action On Sugar campaign leaders. 'The difference is children do not understand the consequences of their behaviour.' Fair point, but what if the average adult doesn't either when it comes to what's in the products that promise big?

'I used to consume energy drinks to stay alert while I studied for long hours, to the point where I'd drink at least six cans a day,'

says 26-year-old PR executive Jess Parker. 'Then, one night, I experienced the worst stomach pain I'd ever had – so severe I went home immediately from the bar I was in and seriously contemplated going to A&E. It hit home that mindlessly putting this junk into my body was having real consequences.'

It's not like us to scaremonger without hard facts, so let's start facing them. There's no legal definition for what actually constitutes an energy drink, but the Department of Health classification reads 'any drink, other than tea or coffee, that contains over 150mg of caffeine per litre'. Your typical 250ml can contains at least 80mg of caffeine – roughly the same as in an average cup of tea – which takes it to 320mg per litre. And Brits can't get enough of the stuff. According to market insight specialist Mintel, the nation consumed an estimated £1.65billion-worth of them in 2017, which equates to 669 million litres, making the UK the biggest consumer in Europe.

Mainlining caffeine isn't constructive in any guise (while there's no established upper limit, the NHS does recommend you cap consumption at 200mg daily if you're pregnant) but particularly because not all caffeine products are created equal. 'Synthetic caffeine (stuff created in a lab using base chemicals such as urea and chloroacetic acid), like that found in most energy drinks, is less advantageous than natural sources of caffeine in foods such as guarana and cocoa,' says Shannon O'Brien, co-founder of Thinknoo, a supplements brand that uses nootropics to counteract the negative effects

EAT SMART



NATURAL HIGHS

Looking for a less synthetic lift? Here are three alternatives to try

THE PLANT-BASED ONE

Tenzing (tenzingnaturalenergy.com)

Made with seven naturally occurring ingredients to help fight fatigue, all 100% plant-based. Added bonus: Tenzing pledges 5% of its profits back into environmental projects and comes in a BPA-free, recyclable can.



THE SCIENCE-BACKED ONE

Thinknoo (thinknoo.com)

Designed to help you get more out of your coffee, these natural supplements use nootropics to help people reduce their caffeine intake without having to forgo mental output. Think that caffeine-induced alertness without the afternoon crash, jitters or inability to sleep thanks to their power to help the body process caffeine faster.



THE STRAIGHT SWAP ONE

Virtue (virtuedrinks.com)

No added sugar, no sweeteners, no calories and only 'naturally sourced' energy from ingredients such as yerba maté, guarana and ginseng. There's still just as much caffeine as a cup of coffee, but you do get added vitamins (B3, B6, B7, B12), too.



of caffeine. Why? 'First, the process of synthesising caffeine involves a number of chemicals including known carcinogens such as trichloroethylene, sodium cyanide and benzene. Second, the myriad of health benefits associated with natural sources, such as helping to protect against illnesses like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's disease, aren't replicated in the man-made alternatives.'

Essentially, the only benefit caffeine drink manufacturers are looking to emulate is the buzz it generates by causing an increase in neuron firing; a reaction that the pituitary gland interprets as an emergency and releases adrenaline in response to. According to the European Food Safety Authority,

consuming 75mg of caffeine in a single dose increases alertness and attention, so your average can or bottle is guaranteed to deliver. But excessive use? According to the World Health Organization, caffeine overdose can lead to palpitations, high blood pressure, nausea and vomiting, convulsions and even death. Experts are concerned that because many of these drinks are sold at a lower price than bottled water or other soft drinks, they're one of the most cost-effective ways to hydrate, meaning the chances of overconsumption are increased. Which segues handily into the other overarching problem with getting your kicks from a can. To up the energising effect, and presumably the taste factor, drinks are loaded with sugar, with one can alone often enough to take you well over your daily 30g added sugar quota. For

example, a 500ml can of Monster will set you back 55g and 473ml of Red Bull racks up 52g. Start drinking several a day and the influx of sugar into your system will significantly increase your risk of health issues such as obesity, heart disease, certain cancers and type 2 diabetes. Some add a Brucie bonus of extra B6 and B12 to aid your nervous system and reduce fatigue, but the argument that the negatives outweigh the positives pretty much still stands.

Following in the footsteps of healthy desk snacks, five-a-day-filled ready meals and sweet muffins disguising beetroot and courgette, the energy drinks industry is wising up to a seismic shift in consumers' priorities towards healthy, low-sugar, plant-based alternatives. 'The evolution of the alternative wellness market for energy drinks is interesting,' says Huib Van Bockel,

To up the energising effect and taste factor, drinks are loaded with sugar

founder of natural energy drink brand Tenzing. 'The products materialising now address the shift in people's desire to consume healthier drinks. It's pretty clear that people not only want to access energy via more natural means, but they also want those products to be plant-based, low in sugar and sustainable – our drinks include Indian gooseberries, green tea, green coffee and guarana.' But despite lots of 'healthier' energy drinks now being available on the market, many still bump up the sweet factor, so always check the label for total sugar content to get a clear view of what you're taking in.

Maybe it's worth asking yourself whether you really need to rely on energy drinks to give you a lift when you start to lag. 'No one needs energy drinks for "energy,"' says Hashem. 'You can get that from many sources in your diet, eg. fats, carbohydrates and even protein – a balanced diet should provide you with everything you require.' And if you can't go without, at least drink clever and swerve synthetic ingredients and piles of sugar. **WH**