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## Energy drink may fuel teens' alcohol use

By IB Times Staff Reporter

Energy drinks, commonly consumed by teens and college students to stay up late, are strongly associated with increased risks for heavy drinking and alcohol dependence, says a research study.

Also increasing in popularity is the practice of mixing alcohol with energy drinks. Since energy drinks are highly caffeinated, it can lead to other problems, in addition to losing sleep, says the study. Moreover, the contents of energy drinks are not regulated.

The research indicates that individuals who have a high frequency of energy drink consumption (52 or more times within a year) were at a statistically significant higher risk for alcohol dependence and episodes of heavy drinking.

Amelia Arria, the lead researcher of the study, Director of the Center on Young Adult Health and Development at the University of Maryland School of Public Health, said that prior research has highlighted the dangers of combining energy drinks with alcohol. The study was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"We were able to examine if energy drink use was still associated with alcohol dependence, after controlling for risk-taking characteristics. The relationship persisted and the use of energy drinks was found to be associated with an increase in the risk of alcohol dependence," said Arria.

The research study used data from more than 1,000 students enrolled at a public university who were asked about their consumption of energy drinks and their alcohol drinking behaviors in the past 12 months.

The researchers found that about 10 percent of students had chugged back energy drinks, such as Red Bull, on more than 52 times in a year. These students were deemed "high-frequency" drinkers.

The researchers found that individuals who consumed energy drinks at a high frequency were more likely to get drunk at an earlier age, drink more per drinking session, and were more likely to develop alcohol dependence compared to both non-users of energy drinks and the low-frequency users.

The high-frequency group registered 142 days of alcohol consumption with more than six drinks a day, compared to 103 days among the low-frequency group taking fewer than five drinks a day. The results of the study confirm and extend earlier research about the risks of energy drink consumption.

A major concern is that mixing energy drinks with alcohol can lead to 'wide-awake drunkenness', where caffeine masks the feeling of drunkenness but does not decrease actual alcohol-related impairment.

As a result, the individual feels less drunk than they really are, which could lead them to consume even more alcohol or engage in risky activities like drunk driving.

"Caffeine does not antagonize or cancel out the impairment associated with drunkenness—it merely disguises the more obvious markers of that impairment,"

said Kathleen Miller, a research scientist from the Research Institute on Addictions at the University at Buffalo.

According to Miller, the next steps in this research include identifying links between energy drinks and other forms of substance abuse, as well assessing the overall prevalence of energy drink use by adolescents and young adults.

"Also needed is research that directly assesses students' reported reasons for mixing alcohol and energy drinks. Anecdotal reports suggest that part of this phenomenon may be driven by the perpetuation of myths (e.g., mixing alcohol and caffeine reduces drunkenness, prevents hangovers, or fools a breathalyzer test) that could be debunked through further education," said Miller.

Arria agrees, adding that further research and regulations are needed to curb this disturbing trend. "The fact that there is no regulation on the amount of caffeine in energy drinks or no requirements related to the labeling of contents or possible health risks is concerning," she said.

The research study has come after the U.S. regulators are poised to ban the sale of caffeine-containing alcoholic drinks amid rising safety concerns, in a blow to several small but fast-growing drinks companies.

Four Loko, Joose and other fruit-flavored, alcoholic beverages will no longer be able to contain caffeine under a series of regulatory actions expected from the FDA and other agencies this week, according to US Senator Charles Schumer.

Additionally, the Federal Trade Commission plans to notify manufacturers that they are engaged in the potential illegal marketing of unsafe alcoholic drinks.

"Let these rulings serve as a warning to anyone who tried to peddle dangerous and toxic brews to our children. Do it and we will shut you down. This ruling should be the nail in the coffin of these dangerous and toxic drinks. Parents should be able to rest a little easier knowing that soon their children won't have access to this deadly brew," said Schumer.

Popular drinks such as Four Loko and Joose contain as much as 2-3 coffee cups worth of caffeine and 2-3 cans of beer per container – a potent, dangerous mix that can be extremely hazardous for teens and adults alike.

Last month, nine students passed out and were hospitalized after drinking Four Loko, leading states and universities across the country to issue ban, limit, or issue warnings about the drink.