Energy drinks have doctors worried—but business is booming

By Alexandra Sifferlin

HEATHER CHACE, a biology teacher at Stroud High School in Oklahoma, says she first noticed her students occasionally drinking energy drinks about six years ago. Now she sees them chugging them on a daily basis—leading to conversations about their “hearts racing” and their “feeling shaky,” she says. They’re not alone. About 50% of adolescents consume energy drinks, according to a recent report in Pediatrics, and 31% do so on a regular basis, increasingly opting for energy drinks over soda. It’s no surprise, given that a March 2015 report in the Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior showed that over 46% of energy-drink ads on TV aired on channels that appeal to adolescents, like MTV, Fuse and BET, helping put the U.S. energy-drink business on track to grow more than 11% by 2019, to an estimated $26.6 billion in annual revenue. But as the industry booms, so does concern about whether energy drinks are safe for kids and teenagers.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest has called on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to add safety warnings on energy-drink bottles. Senators Edward Markey, Dick Durbin and Richard Blumenthal have called for a ban on marketing to minors. And the American Academy of Pediatrics went so far as to say energy drinks have “no place in the diet of children and adolescents.” Their reasoning: unlike coffee and soda, many energy drinks contain two or more stimulants, including the naturally-sounding supplements guarana and ginseng. How all these ingredients work together is unknown, but many experts say it appears to be a risky mix.

A 2010 study, for example, found that sugar-free energy drinks affected the heart in a way that scientists think increases the risk of adverse heart events in susceptible people. Other research says the drinks make it harder for kids to pay attention in school; scientists recently found that middle schoolers who consume sugary energy drinks are 66% likelier to display symptoms of hyperactivity than those who don’t.

“A web of lawsuits has been filed calling for a ban on marketing to minors and for a ban on energy drinks—so far without success,” says Dr. Marcie Schneider, the director of the University of Maryland Children’s Hospital’s Adolescent Medicine Program. “We are not at zero. ”

“More ‘natural’ highs?

Most energy drinks contain ingredients other than caffeine that may perk you up. Here are some other things that may be adding to the buzz.

GUARANA

This plant naturally contains large amounts of caffeine, so its presence in an energy drink increases the drink’s total caffeine content, according to the NIH.

GINSENG

The amino acid that supports brain development occurs naturally in the body and is generally thought to be safe in the amounts used in supplements and drinks. In large amounts, however, it may increase heart rate and cause nervousness.