Policy Brief

Energy Drink Regulation

Protecting Youth from Dangerous Products

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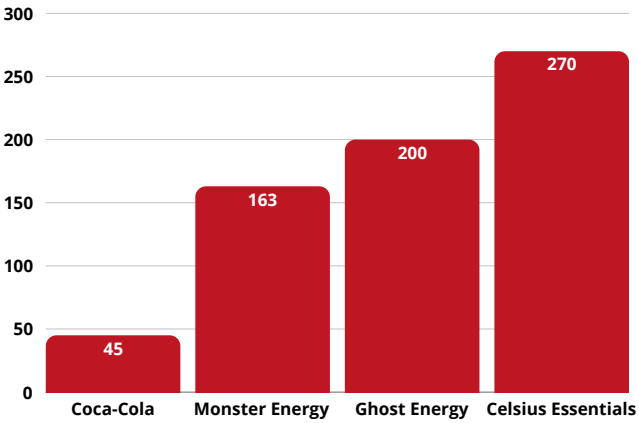
Background

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) concluded that "caffeine and other stimulant substances contained in energy drinks have no place in the diet of children and adolescents." [1] Aggressive marketing drives consumption and sales among young people, and a growing body of literature supports the need for energy drink regulations to protect children and teens.

ENERGY DRINK SALES AND CONSUMPTION

- Energy drinks are readily accessible to children. They account for approximately one-third of all packaged drinks sold at US convenience stores, where they are stocked alongside sports drinks and sodas. [2]
- Energy drink brands and sales are growing rapidly. In the US, the market size of energy drinks grew 13.5% per year on average from 2018 to 2023, and continued growth is expected. [3]
- Children and young adults (13-24 years) have the highest prevalence of energy drink consumption. Almost one-third of adolescents (12-17 years) drink them regularly. [4,5]
- More than three-quarters of parents support limiting youth access to energy drinks with age restrictions for purchase.[6] Yet, a child of any age can purchase energy drinks in Connecticut.

HEALTH RISKS OF ENERGY DRINKS



Milligrams of caffeine in a 16-ounce can of popular drinks.

- Children under age 12 should have no caffeine. For teens, a single energy drink **provides up to three times the maximum daily limit of caffeine** experts recommend (100 mg). [7]
- Unlike coffee and other caffeinated drinks, energy drinks also contain ingredients that act as stimulants, such as taurine. These interact with caffeine and can exacerbate negative effects. [8]
- Most energy drinks contain high levels of added sugar.
- Consumption can lead to anxiety, suicidal ideation, low academic performance, alcohol/tobacco/marijuana use, and **dangerous health outcomes**, including heart attacks, seizures, and diabetes. [8]
- Children face **increased risk for caffeine toxicity** due to their small body size and lack of tolerance to caffeine. [8]

ENERGY DRINK MARKETING TO YOUTH

Companies continue to aggressively market these products to teens. Recent marketing campaigns target children and portray products as healthy and important for success in sports, including:

- **Promotion via social media** with marketing disguised as entertaining content or advice from trusted influencers and athletes they admire.[9]
- Collaborations with popular **children's food and candy brands** that appeal to pre-adolescent children. For example, candy brands such as Swedish Fish, Sour Patch Kids, Warheads, and Skittles appear on the front-of-package and in-store displays of energy drink brands.[9]
- Sales of **pre-workout products** with promises to boost athletic performance. Of note, a number of deaths have occurred among young people who consumed energy drinks before and/or after exercising. [10]

Candy | Energy drink

Soda and candy | Energy drink

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

Legislation should prohibit the sale of energy drinks to children under the age of 16 in Connecticut. This would signal the state's commitment to protecting the health and well-being of children. This policy is:

- Necessary. It would reduce youth access to products that pose a danger to developing brains and bodies.
- Widely supported by parents and US public health and medical organizations.
- Feasible. Retail outlets are already legally required to verify the age of customers purchasing tobacco and alcohol. Specialty retailer GNC has already set an 18+ age restriction to purchase energy drinks.

Conclusion

Evidence of potential toxicity and a wide range of other negative consequences associated with consuming energy drinks, coupled with aggressive youth-targeted marketing, justify the need for measures to reduce consumption among children and teens. While people with underlying health conditions may be more susceptible to the adverse effects of energy drink consumption, these products can also cause cardiac arrest in young, healthy people.[8] Further, as **the vast majority of energy drink brands state on the product label that the drink is intended for healthy adults 18 years of age or older**, such a policy would support energy drink makers' efforts to ensure products are not consumed by children.

Learn more about the Rudd Center's research on food marketing:

uconnruddcenter.org/foodmarketing

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