Medical Xpress

Experts call for age restrictions on the sale of energy drinks

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Credit: Newcastle University

Research led by Newcastle University shows that around one in three young people say that they regularly consume energy drinks, which typically contain high levels of caffeine and sugar.

The dangers of energy drinks are well documented with evidence indicating that regular or heavy use by under-18s is likely to be detrimental to their health.

This is the first study to explore in-depth the views of children, as young as 10-years-old, on energy drinks and the research was published in the academic journal, *PLOS ONE.*

Study's findings

Researchers spoke to children and young people, aged 10-14 years old, from primary and secondary schools in Country Durham, North East England, and visited shops in the local area.

The experts discovered that energy drinks were:

- Easily available to children and young people in local shops. The children were well aware of the different brands, key ingredients and some of the risks linked to drinking them. However, they were less certain about the amount of sugar and caffeine contained in the drinks.
- Sold for as little as 25p (single cans are often on promotion, for example, four for £1) with some of the young people taking advantage of the offers by pooling their money and sharing the drinks.
- Targeted at children online in pop-up adverts, on television, in computer games for over-18s, and through sports sponsorship. Some of the young people said that they chose energy drinks to 'fit in' or 'look tough' but others had made the decision, as a friendship group, to stop drinking them.
- Linked to activities that could be considered attractive to young people, including music, extreme sports, sexuality (both masculinity and femininity), gaming, drinking alcohol and general risk-taking.

Health dangers

Dr Shelina Visram, from Newcastle University's Institute of Health and Society, led the study in collaboration with Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health.

She said: "This study looked at the complex mix of factors that impact on children and young people's attitudes in relation to energy drinks.

"Our participants were generally aware of the main energy drink brands, ingredients and potential health risks. But they were also confused by the mixed messages from the soft drinks industry.

"By law, energy drink labels must include the warning 'not recommended for children' and yet participants as young as 10 years of age told us they could purchase these products in almost any shop, at affordable prices.

"This study provides important insights into the consumption choices of children and young people, and highlights the key role played by the marketing activities of energy drink companies. The findings should be used to inform policies and interventions that address the behaviours of manufacturers and retailers as well as children and parents."

Existing research cited in the paper shows that use of energy drinks by under-18s is associated with a range of negative effects and unhealthy behaviours, including physical health complaints, such as headaches, palpitations and insomnia, and higher rates of alcohol, smoking and drug use.

The children and young people in the study were aware of the potential risks involved in drinking energy drinks.

During focus groups many of the participants suggested putting age restrictions on energy drinks, similar to those on cigarettes and alcohol.

Proposals were also put forward to position drinks away from children and young people in shops, and study participants wanted the labelling on energy drinks to be clear and understandable, for example by showing sugar content per spoonful.

The UK government has already announced a tax on sugary drinks as a step towards tackling childhood obesity, but energy drinks usually contain high amounts of both sugar and caffeine. The authors would now like the government to go a step further.

Dr Amelia Lake, Fuse Associate Director, said: "While this is a small study in one part of England it gives us a huge amount of insight.

"What's interesting is the young people are essentially asking why these drinks are being sold and marketed to them when we know they are not good for them.

"They are telling us that energy drinks cost less than water or pop!

"They are asking, why aren't energy drinks age restricted like cigarettes? Why can they get them so easily? But they are also well aware there isn't a simple solution.

"Schools have tried restricting these drinks - now it's time to try and do something more central. These drinks are a problem and a government solution is needed."

Energy drink sales

On average, young people in the UK consume more energy drinks than those in other European countries. Sales of energy drinks in the UK increased by 185% between 2006 and 2015, with 672 million litres drunk in 2015 and a total market value of over £2 billion.

A single can of popular brands on the market can contain around 160mg of caffeine, while the European Food Safety Authority recommends an intake of no more than 105mg caffeine per day for an average 11-year-old.

More information: Shelina Visram et al. Children and young people's perceptions of energy drinks: A qualitative study, *PLOS ONE* (2017). DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0188668

Provided by Newcastle University

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