

- A partnership of public health researchers across the five universities in North East England
- Working with policy makers and practice partners to improve health and wellbeing and tackle inequalities
- A founding member of the NIHR School for Public Health Research (SPHR)

Evidence shows wider range of risks associated with energy drinks in children

In the most comprehensive study of its kind, researchers from Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, found that drinking energy drinks is associated with an increased risk of mental health issues among children and young people, including anxiety, stress, depression and suicidal thoughts.

Researchers from Fuse at Teesside University and Newcastle University, looked at data from 57 studies of over 1.2 million children and young people from more than 21 countries.

The study's findings build on earlier research but highlight more risks associated with energy drinks, which typically contain high levels of caffeine and sugar.

The UK Food Standards Agency states that caffeine levels in a can of energy drink can vary between 80mg (equivalent to two cans of cola or a mug of instant coffee) and 200mg (equivalent to five cans of cola).

The researchers found that energy drink consumption was more common among boys than girls, and was also associated with increased risky behaviours such as substance use, violence, and unsafe sex.

It also links consumption of the drinks with an increased risk of poor academic performance, sleep problems, and unhealthy dietary habits.

The study adds to the growing body of evidence that energy drinks are harmful to the health of children and young people. The researchers say it highlights the need for regulatory action to restrict the sale and marketing of energy drinks to children and young people.

This is an update to a review in 2016. In 2017, the same researchers from Fuse were the first to publish research

exploring in-depth the views of children, as young as 10-years-old, on energy drinks.

The research revealed that energy drinks were easily available in local shops; sold for as little as 25p ('four for £1' promotions); targeted at children through online adverts, computer games, television and sports sponsorship; and linked to extreme sports, gaming, sexuality, gender, and use of sexualised imagery.

Previous research had also found that up to a third of children in the UK consume caffeinated energy drinks on a weekly basis and that young people in the UK were the biggest consumers of energy drinks in Europe for their age group.

Many large UK supermarkets subsequently agreed to ban the sale of energy drinks to children.

Key findings

- The study's findings build on earlier research but highlight more risks associated with energy drinks, which typically contain high levels of caffeine and sugar. This study is the most comprehensive review of the research to date.
- Additional health effects noted in this review include increased risk of suicide, psychological distress, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms, depressive and panic behaviours, allergic diseases, insulin resistance, and tooth decay.
- Energy drink consumption was more common among boys than girls, and was also associated with increased risky behaviours such as substance use, violence, and unsafe sex.
- It also links consumption of the drinks with an increased risk of poor academic performance, sleep problems, and unhealthy dietary habits.

Policy relevance and implications

- The new study adds to the growing body of evidence that energy drinks are harmful to the health of children and young people. The researchers say it highlights the need for regulatory action to restrict the sale and marketing of energy drinks to children and young people.
- The researchers and over 40 health related organisations are calling on government to restrict the sale and marketing of energy drinks to children and young people.
- A number of countries have attempted to regulate energy drinks, including bans on sales to under 18s in Lithuania and Latvia.
- The UK government ran a consultation on ending the sale of energy drinks to children in England and also proposed this in their 2019 green paper 'Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s'. While 93% of respondents to the consultation supported restricting sales to under 16s, there has been no further action.
- In 2022, the devolved government in Wales launched its own consultation to ban the sales of energy drinks to under 16s.

Experts ask how much more evidence is needed before government action?

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

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Web: doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2023.08.024

Timeline of Fuse's energy drink research and impact: bit.ly/EDtimeline

Review in 2016: doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2015-010380

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, is a collaboration of the 5 North East Universities of Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland & Teesside.

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