

POSITION STATEMENT: **ENERGY DRINKS**

KEY MESSAGES

- Children and young people in the UK consume more energy drinks than in any other country in Europe
- Evidence suggests that overconsumption of energy drinks is detrimental to children and young people's short-and long-term health and wellbeing
- The Government should introduce the proposed sales restriction on energy drinks to under 16-year-olds

Overview

An energy drink is a beverage that typically contains high levels of sugar, caffeine, additives and legal stimulants such as guarana, taurine and L-carnitine [1], although many brands now offer and promote zero sugar options. EDs are categorised specifically by their high caffeine content >150mg/litre. Despite sales of soft drinks steadily declining, EDs continue to grow in popularity amongst the UK population, particularly among children and young people (CYP). In 2021, the UK consumed over 906 million litres of EDs [2], with brands such as Red Bull, Lucozade and Monster leading the market. Although initially marketed at athletes as a quick way to increase energy levels and mental performance, energy drinks manufacturers spend millions on marketing their products through TV and digital marketing, social media and sports sponsorship, specifically targeting adolescent males [3]. Red Bull, for example, spend 25-30% of their yearly revenue on marketing and sponsor athletes in over 73 countries [4]. In 2021, Red Bull's total revenue rose by 19% to £414.7 million. There is currently no UK recommended caffeine intake, but the Food Standards Agency recommend children limit caffeine intake, and that pregnant women do not consume more than 200mg a day [5]. European legislation requires beverages that contain >150mg caffeine/litre to state on the label 'high caffeine content' and 'not recommended' for children, pregnant women or

breastfeeding women' [6]. CYP are thought to be more at risk of the ill effects from regular consumption of caffeine, however, it is unclear how much caffeine is too much for CYP.

What does the evidence say?

- ED consumption can cause immediate health problems such as headaches, digestive issues, anxiety and sleep problems [7].
- A study found that CYP who consumed EDs on five or more days per week were likely to experience low overall wellbeing, headaches, irregular sleep, irritability and school exclusions [7].
- ED consumption clusters with health-damaging and risk-taking behaviour, including binge drinking, smoking, illicit drug use and poor dietary behaviour [8].
- A third of UK children consume EDs weekly, with the highest intake among 11-18-year-old boys [9].
- There are consistent associations between ED consumption and sociodemographic factors; higher consumption is reported in boys, those living in Northern England and children eligible for free school meals [10].
- A review of the literature revealed that caffeine and other stimulant substances in EDs have no place in CYP's diets [11].

Policy context

Since 2017, following significant from campaign groups, teacher's unions and the wider public health community, some retailers announced they would introduce a sales restriction on EDs to under-16s, including Asda, Tesco, Waitrose and Boots, whereby children would be asked for ID when purchasing these drinks. However, there are still many retailers who sell EDs to CYP under the age of 16 such as independent and chain convenience stores and corner shops [14]. A level playing field is needed across all retailers to ensure that CYP cannot access these drinks.

In 2019, the Government announced a sales restriction of energy drinks to children under the age of 16 as part of the Prevention Green Paper [12]. Despite research proving that overconsumption leads to significant health implications and poor educational outcomes - the ban has still not been put in place [13]. The Welsh Government are currently considering an ED sales restriction to under 16s [14].

Introduced in 2018, the soft drinks industry levy (SDIL) [16] encouraged soft drinks manufacturers to remove added sugar from their products, promote low sugar and diet drink options and reduce portion sizes for high sugar drinks.

The levy saw 45,000 tonnes of sugar removed from soft drinks [17]. 89% of sales now come from low or no-sugar drinks, and evidence suggests that the levy is associated with fewer cases of obesity among 11-year-old girls. However, this levy did not include drinks containing caffeine.

Our position and what we will do?

Advocacy: In 2015, we launched the 'Give up Loving Pop' campaign to raise awareness of the health harms associated with regular consumption of sugar drinks. As part of the resources for Key Stage 3 pupils (aged 11-14), we have produced lesson plans which highlight both the negative impact of EDs on CYP health but also exploring how these drinks are marketed to CYP through sport.

Policy change: We are particularly concerned about the role marketing is playing using effective tactics through sports and e-gaming sponsorship to position EDs in the minds of CYP. We urge the Government to push ahead with the proposed sales restriction on EDs to under 16-year-olds to create a level playing field across retailers and ensure any legislation to limit the promotion and marketing of food and drink includes EDs, regardless of whether they contain sugar.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure a mandatory sales restriction on energy drinks to CYP becomes UK legislation, and includes all types of retailers such as corner shops (popular purchasing spot for CYP)
- Support industry and retailers to implement the sales restriction and provide adequate funding for local authorities to monitor the ban, ensuring significant penalties for retailers who do not abide
- Consider restricting the marketing of energy drinks to children and young people to form part of a comprehensive plan to reduce children's exposure to energy drinks

References

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