Dear Alice,

Are the health risks of drinking Red Bull and vodka in moderation (two to three) drinks an evening any greater than drinking two or three rum and Cokes, or two or three anything and Mountain Dew?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The three mixers you described above may taste very different from each other, but what they all have in common is caffeine. Of the three, Red Bull is the most caffeinated, with about 80 milligrams per serving, (about 5 mg less than 8 ounces of brewed coffee). Coca-Cola contains less than half of that, at 34 mg per serving, while Mountain Dew is in the middle at 55 mg per serving. Most other sodas that contain caffeine fall somewhere within this range, while other drinks labeled as energy drinks may contain much more.

When caffeine is mixed with alcohol, it may have many different effects on your body. Caffeine acts as a stimulant, while alcohol functions as a depressant. Both of them are diuretics, meaning that drinking the two together may further increase your risk of dehydration (and make you have to go to the bathroom more often). Being dehydrated means your body won't be able to process alcohol as effectively, and may lead to a worse hangover in the morning. The combination of alcohol and caffeine also may exhibit an stronger negative effect on coordination, balance, and ability to regulate body temperature.

Caffeine's stimulating effects may allow the drinker to be more alert, and therefore drink more alcohol than usual without feeling impaired. However, caffeine has no effect on one's Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) and the person will feel the full effects of the alcohol after the caffeine has worn off. Because Red Bull contains more caffeine than the sodas you mentioned, it may cause all of the effects described above to be more pronounced.

Besides the caffeine level, soda also differs from Red Bull in its carbonation level. Soda usually has more carbonation than Red Bull or other energy drinks. Because carbonation promotes the absorption of alcohol, mixing any sodas with alcohol may also allow the effects of intoxication to be more pronounced. Whichever mixer you choose, keep in mind that sodas and energy drinks both pack anywhere between 100 to 200 calories per serving in addition to the calories from the alcohol.
Whenever alcohol enters the picture, remember to drink plenty of water along with the beverage of choice. Snacking may also allow the body to absorb alcohol a bit more slowly (although eventually the body will still absorb all the alcohol), and may help avoid "crashing" from a sugar or caffeine overload. Here are a couple of questions that you may consider: Why do I want to mix energy drinks with alcohol? Is it the taste? Have I been told that it will keep me from getting drunk? Energy drinks or otherwise, am I being responsible in my consumption of alcohol?

Given how new the energy drinks are to the market, it is a bit too soon to tell what all the potential effects might be; more research needs to be done in this area. You can read through the archives, and the Related Q&A below, for more information about alcohol, hangovers, and health.

Alice!
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Related questions
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If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

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