Mixing alcohol with energy drinks — Safe or risky? [1]

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 (non-alcoholic beverages) you described above may taste very different from each other, but what they all have in common is caffeine. When caffeine is mixed with alcohol, it can have many different effects on the body. Caffeine acts as a stimulant, while alcohol functions as a depressant. This combination can lead to some problematic health issues. However, as you suggested, the results could depend on how much caffeine and alcohol are consumed and how quickly. Because energy drinks contain more caffeine than sodas, it may cause the effects of combining the two drugs to be more pronounced. Curious about how this combination may impact health? Read on!

Energy drinks such Red Bull contain anywhere from 27 to 164 milligrams (mg) of caffeine per serving, whereas sodas typically contain between 24 and 46 mg per serving. Caffeine's stimulating effects may allow a person to feel more alert, and therefore they may be more likely to drink more alcohol than usual without feeling impaired. And the more caffeine that’s in their system, the more wide-awake they may feel. It’s good to note though that caffeine has no effect on blood alcohol concentration (BAC). So, even though a person may feel awake and sober, their coordination, balance, and judgment may all be impacted. What’s more, they might not feel the full effects of the alcohol they’ve consumed until after the caffeine has worn off. This could lead to drinking more than intended or doing things they might not normally do when intoxicated.

Along with the potential for drinking more than intended (or just large amounts of alcohol in general), combining alcohol and caffeine could also increase a person’s risk of experiencing heart palpitations and feelings of agitation. The combination may also impact sleep quality, resulting in waking several times throughout the night and not being able to get a night of restful sleep. Finally, both caffeine and alcohol are diuretics, meaning that drinking the two together may
further increase the risk of dehydration. Being dehydrated hinders the body’s ability to process alcohol effectively, and therefore increase the chances experiencing hangover symptoms.

You might now be wondering what can be done to avoid these possible health risks (beyond the decision not to mix the two substances). Whenever alcohol enters the picture, it can help to remember to drink plenty of water along with the beverage of choice to help stay hydrated. Snacking may also allow the body time to absorb alcohol a bit more slowly and may help stave off a “crash” from too much sugar or caffeine. Additionally, for those considering mixing the two but are concerned about the risks, ponder these questions: Why do I want to mix energy drinks with alcohol? Is it the taste? Have I been told that it can keep me from getting drunk? Am I drinking in moderation and in a lower-risk manner?

Long story short, mixing alcohol with beverages that contain caffeine could lead to potential negative health effects. However, drinking in a lower-risk manner may help you avoid these unintended consequences. Still have questions? Consider checking out the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol archives and the related Q&As for more information.

Alice!
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