

Best (and Worst) Energy Drinks and Snacks

Get the best pick-me-up possible with our guide to the newest fatigue-fighting foods and drinks



Coffee isn't the only way to get your daily caffeine fix. New drinks, bars, and even chews are popping up everywhere, providing a jolt of energy in grab-and-go packages. Unfortunately, many of these products contain added sugars or other health-harming additives that set you up for a crash.

The good news is that lots of foods without energy on their labels boost pep as well. "There's nothing magic about energy foods," says Nancy Clark, RD, author of *Nancy Clark's Sports Nutrition Guidebook*. Here, we break down the best and worst energy products and provide alternative ways to [give you some get-up-and-go](#).

By Brittany Risher

Energy Drinks

These beverages, like Red Bull, are caffeine-and-sugar cocktails that come in 8-ounce cans. Caffeine boosts cognitive performance, and glucose (the brain's main source of fuel) gives an added jolt. Many of these drinks also include a rain forest fruit called guarana, which contains still more caffeine.

Down a can and it's hard not to feel rocket fueled—but some people also experience anxiety, insomnia, headaches, and increased heart rate and blood pressure from all the caffeine. And the sugar can total 31 g, as much as a can of soda packs. By comparison, a standard cup of coffee with 2 teaspoons of sugar has about 8 g and will fortify your body with disease-fighting antioxidants in addition to caffeine.

Energy Drinks: **SKIP IT**

The Dangers of Drinking Energy Drinks

Given the list of ingredients, it is fairly easy to see that energy drinks are a deceptive combination of [soft drink](#) and pseudo-nutritional supplement. The largest problem with them is that people tend to abuse them, drinking more than one at a time, or mixing them with alcohol.

My main concern with the use of the herbs in these drinks is their source. The mass manufacturers of energy drinks are not required by law to list whether or not the herbs they use, have been sprayed with toxic [pesticides](#), irradiated or watered with contaminated water supplies, so there is no telling what other toxins are contained in these drinks and whether or not these herbs will have a negative effect on the body.

The [caffeine](#) that is found in energy drinks is dangerous enough on its own. Not only is caffeine addictive, it acts as both a stimulant and a diuretic. As a stimulant, caffeine can make you have anxiety attacks, heart palpitations, and insomnia.

When consumed in large or regular quantities, caffeine can also make you jittery or irritable. As a diuretic, caffeine causes your kidneys to remove extra fluid from your body. If you consume energy drinks while sweating, these effects can be particularly dangerous because you can become severely dehydrated quickly.

Many younger people have started mixing energy drinks with alcohol because it makes them feel alert and energetic, even when they are drunk. Because alcohol and caffeine dehydrate our bodies, especially after a night of dancing. There have been many instances, where energy drinks mixed with alcohol has caused severe dehydration.

Because so much additional research needs to be done on the other ingredients found in energy drinks, I recommend all people avoid drinking energy drinks, they only add more toxins to an already toxin burdened body and decrease our bodies internal water supply and natural detoxification processes.

The bottom line concerning energy drinks is that medical professionals simply do not know the long-term effects of consuming these beverages. It is known, however, that large amounts of [sugar](#) and caffeine are harmful to our bodies. For people to utilize energy drinks during exercise or other strenuous activity compounds the problem of dehydration, and does nothing to provide the body with any necessary nutrients or fluids.



Energy Bars

Energy bars are easy to buy and stash in your purse for a pick-me-up on the go. They purport to provide lasting energy, give you the nutrients you need, and power you through a tough workout. Some of them actually are good for you—especially those such as Lärabar and Bear Naked Grain-ola that contain whole grains, nuts, and fruit.

The problem is, many are little better than candy bars, with nearly half their calories coming from various forms of sugar. While these may give you a 15-minute mood boost, you'll get a sugar crash soon after and will have consumed 200 or more calories. So choose carefully or make one yourself.

Energy Bars: TRY IT



Energy Shots

Your friends the food marketers thought it would be fun to compress a full-size energy drink into a 2-ounce can. Women often gravitate to energy shots because they have fewer calories and easily slip into a purse. Manufacturers claim the energy boost acts faster and lasts longer, but there's no proof, says Liz Applegate, PhD, director of sports nutrition at the University of California, Davis.

In fact, because the cans are petite (and contain artificial sweeteners instead of sugar, which companies say prevents a crash), you might be tempted to drink more of them, making it easier to OD on caffeine. And the taste...well, the label may say "lime," but your mouth will know better—metallic and bitter is more like it.

Energy Shots: SKIP IT



Energy Chews

Jelly Belly Sports Beans, Gu Chomps, and other energy chews are similar to gels but, well, chewable. They're great for endurance athletes who have "bonked" or "hit a wall" and need immediate fuel to complete a race, especially if they can't stomach the taste of gels. But some of these, experts say, are basically gumdrops with added vitamins and minerals.

Assuming you get your nutrients from real food, you don't need these, so the only "benefit" is sugar. In the middle of an Ironman? Go ahead and pop a few into your mouth. Otherwise, think of energy jelly beans and chews as candy. You wouldn't expect sustained energy from a bag of Skittles, so why think these will be any different?

Energy Chews: SKIP IT



Organic Energy Drinks

Yep, even energy drinks have gone green. Steaz, Sambazon, and Guayakí offer organic beverages that promise to make you alert, peppy, and focused—naturally. In addition to sugar and various fruit extracts, all include yerba maté

The leaves of this tropical tree contain caffeine and two similar stimulants, theophylline and theobromine, and have been used by South Americans to combat fatigue. Lab studies also rate yerba maté high in antioxidants. The downside is that the sugar contents are similar to those of other energy drinks—and organic drinks cost more and are not as easy to find. Still, for liquid lightning, these are your best choice among the canned beverages.

Organic Energy Drinks: TRY IT

Better Energy Pick-Me-Up: Smoothies

The fruit's carbs and yogurt's protein keep blood sugar steady for a lasting lift. Make a power snack by blending 1/2 c fat-free milk, 3 Tbsp low-fat vanilla yogurt, and 1/2 c frozen raspberries.

210 calories, 7 g protein, 45 g carb, 5 g fiber, 1 g fat, 0.5 g sat fat, 85 mg sodium

Better Energy Pick-Me-Up: Dark Chocolate

Though plain chocolate may set you up for a crash, eating Dove Rich Dark Chocolate Covered Almonds will provide the same filling combo of carbs and protein, plus a heap of healthy fats from the nuts.

Per 13 pieces: 210 calories, 3 g protein, 19 g carb, 3 g fiber, 15 g fat, 6 g sat fat, 10 mg sodium



Better Energy Pick-Me-Up: Fruit and Nut Butter

There's a reason why endurance athletes love the banana-peanut butter combo. The carbs in the banana (1 medium) provide energy, while the protein in the peanut butter (2 tsp) digests slowly to keep you feeling satisfied and energized longer.

170 calories, 4 g protein, 29 g carb, 4 g fiber, 6 g fat, 1.5 g sat fat, 50 mg sodium