

Sports or energy drinks?

Do you know the difference between a sports drink and an energy drink? If not, then you are not alone.

There is much confusion over the two terms with many people using them interchangeably. In reality, however,

'energy drinks' and 'sports drinks' are very different.

'Energy drinks' are marketed for their mental stimulant effect. Basically they are soft drinks that contain high levels of substances, such as caffeine, taurine, and glucuronolactone. Indeed the term 'energy drink' is often a misnomer as many have no more calories than standard soft drinks.

However, it is the high levels of stimulants they contain, in particular when combined with alcohol, that has led to concerns about their consumption.

Sports drinks, on the other hand, do not have a stimulant effect, and although some contain caffeine, the levels used are not high. Instead, sports drinks are specifically designed for, or marketed towards, people who are undertaking physical activity.

One particular group of sports drinks are carbohydrate-rich energy drinks. These drinks are specifically

designed for use by physically active individuals and are primarily used shortly before or after exercise to boost muscle glycogen stores and help optimise sporting performance. These drinks are supported by extensive scientific and nutritional research to back up their safety and effectiveness.

In most EU countries stimulant drinks are considered as normal foods (not sports foods) and are regulated as such. Most concerns relate to taurine and glucurono-lactone, but because there is insufficient scientific evidence to support a ban on the use of these ingredients a recent EU meeting agreed to take no action at the present time. The Scientific Committee for Food (SCF), however, is currently considering new data on these drinks and its opinion is expected before the end of the year. In the light of that opinion the Commission may reconsider its position.

As far as sports drinks are concerned, the category of carbohydrate-rich sports drinks has already been recognised by the EU Scientific Committee for Foods in its report of July 2000 (Report of the Scientific

Committee on Food on composition and specification of food intended to meet the expenditure of intense muscular effort especially for sportsmen (SCF/NUT/SPORT/5 Final, 11 July 2000). Recommendations for

the composition of both solid and liquid products within the category were included and will form the basis of European-wide legislation on all sports nutrition products to be drafted this year.

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