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Should we be concerned about energy drinks and young people's health?

Around one in three young people (under 18) say that they regularly consume energy drinks, which typically contain high levels of caffeine and sugar in combination with other ingredients known to have stimulant properties. On average, young people in the UK consume more energy drinks than those in other European countries.

Energy drink consumption in primary and secondary schools was identified as a concern in County Durham by parents, teachers and other professionals. A research study involving staff from Fuse (Centre for Translational Research in Public Health) was designed to find out more about this issue in order to inform plans to develop initiatives and resources to educate young people and parents.

It is the first UK-based study on this topic and the first qualitative research on energy drinks to involve primary school-aged children. This qualitative research used group and one-to-one discussions to explore views and experiences of energy drinks, and what these meant to the participants.

Before conducting this qualitative work, we conducted a rapid review of the published literature relating to energy drinks to explore any evidence of associations between children and young people's consumption of energy drinks and their health and wellbeing, social, behavioural or educational outcomes. This review demonstrated that consumption of energy drinks by under-18s is associated with a number of adverse outcomes and risky behaviours.

We also conducted a qualitative study involving four local schools in County Durham. Thirty-seven pupils from either year 6 (age 10-11) or year 9 (age 13-14) took part in one of eight focus group discussions. Eleven members of staff from across the four schools were interviewed and we also conducted three focus groups with parents.

Three of the schools helped to carry out a mapping exercise involving a small group of year 6 or year 9 pupils. The purpose of this exercise was to involve young people in the process of surveying the accessibility and availability of energy drinks

locally, drawing on their knowledge and enabling them to become young researchers themselves.

The qualitative research and mapping exercise highlighted a complex picture of energy drink consumption by children and young people, in terms of patterns of use, motivating and influencing factors, and perceived positive and negative effects. This complexity will present challenges for policies and interventions which may seek to address this issue.

Key Findings

- The existing literature, most of which is based on research from the USA, shows that use of energy drinks by under-18s is associated with a range of negative effects and unhealthy behaviours, including physical health complaints, such as headaches, palpitations and insomnia, and higher rates of alcohol, smoking and drug use.
- There may be some benefits in terms of sport performance, but these findings are based on research involving small numbers of elite junior athletes and should be treated with caution.
- Discussions with participants in our study suggest that energy drink use by school-age children is widespread. Branding, marketing and social norms (rules of behaviour that are considered acceptable in a group) were all important factors in their consumption choices.
- Young people were aware of some of the contents of energy drinks and also of some of the associated health risks, but many still chose to drink them for reasons that included taste and cost.
- Energy drinks were available in many local shops and there was often a wide variety of flavours and brands to choose from. In many shops, 'own brand' energy drinks were among the cheapest drinks available and were nearly always cheaper than water.
- Participants felt that better education about energy drinks would be the most acceptable form of intervention. Many were sceptical about the likely success of any initiatives which sought to reduce access among under-18s because of the difficulties of enforcement.

Policy relevance and Implications

- Knowledge of the risks associated with consumption did not appear to prevent children and young people from purchasing a cheap, readily available drink that “tastes good” and was heavily marketed towards them.
- Energy drinks were associated with a number of activities which could be considered attractive to young people, including music, extreme sports, sexuality (both masculinity and femininity), gaming, alcohol consumption and general risk-taking behaviour.
- Participants felt that any potential policies and interventions in this issue should be designed and developed with input from young people as far as possible.
- Suggestions for interventions included school-based educational initiatives, improved labelling and marketing of energy drinks, peer-based approaches, and use of social media.
- Opportunities exist to develop and build on existing critical and analytical thinking about energy drinks amongst young people through the school curriculum.

“The strong and pervasive influence of branding and marketing by energy drink companies should not be underestimated”

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

The research was commissioned and funded by The Children’s Foundation Child Health Research Programme 2013-14. The funders had no role in the study design, data collection and analysis, or preparation of the final report. The research was carried out by a team from Durham and Teesside Universities, including members of Fuse, the Centre for Translational Research in Public Health.

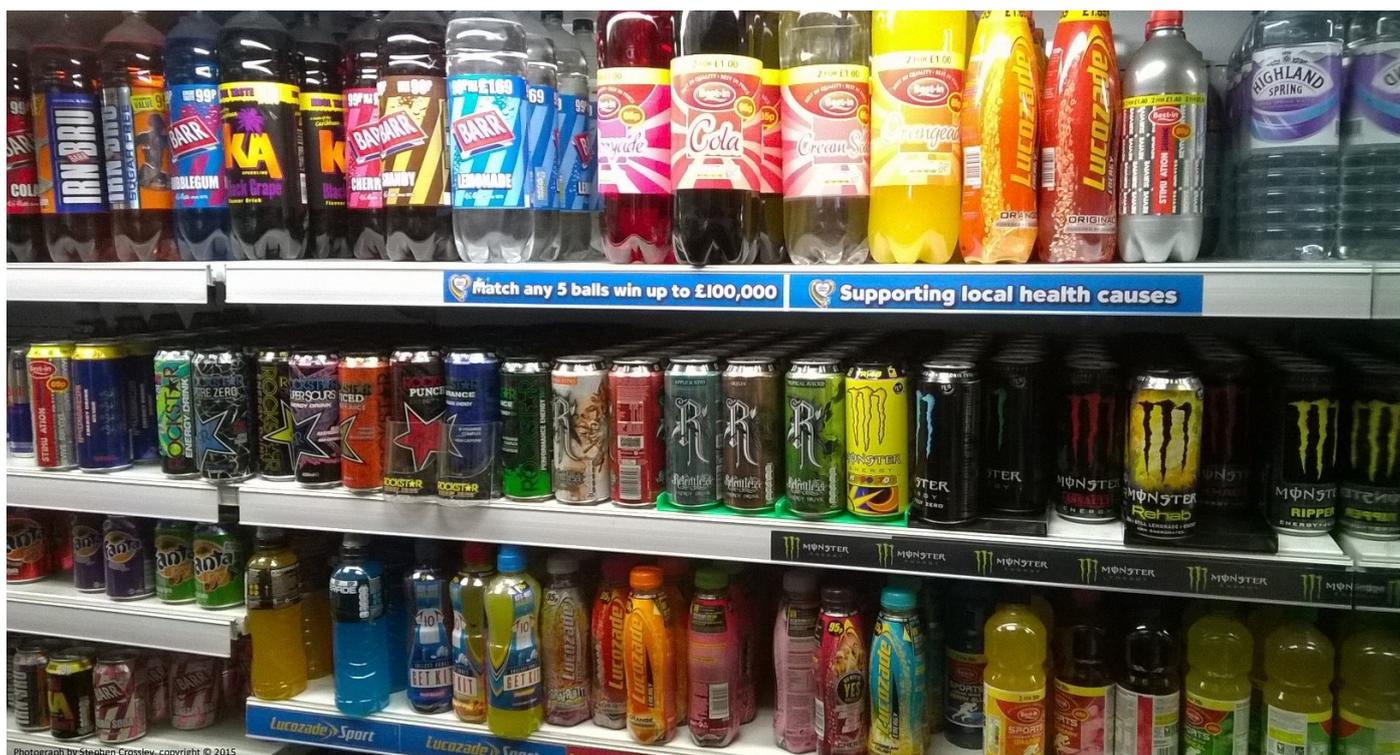
If you would like find out more about the HYPER! (Hearing Young People’s Views on Energy Drinks: Research) study and access a copy of the final report, please visit the website: www.dur.ac.uk/public.health/projects/current/hyper.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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Fuse is one of five UKCRC Public Health Research Centres of Excellence. It brings together public health researchers from across the five universities in North East England.

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