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**Energy Drinks and Food Bars: Power or Hype?**

**The Buzz on Energy Foods**

Energy drinks and nutrition bars often make big promises. Some say they'll increase energy and alertness, others offer extra nutrition, and some even claim to boost your athletic performance or powers of concentration. But once you cut through the hype and look past the flashy packaging on energy products, chances are what you're mostly getting is a stiff dose of sugar and caffeine.

So should you eat or drink these products? As with everything, they're OK in moderation. The occasional energy drink is fine and a protein bar in the morning is a better choice than not getting any breakfast at all. But people like Javier — who usually has about three or four energy drinks and a couple of protein bars every day — are overdoing it.

**Make Smart Choices**

With so much going on in our lives, lots of people feel tired and run down. And many of us find ourselves skipping a meal sometimes. So it's not surprising that nutrition, protein, and energy drinks and food bars have flooded the market, offering us the convenience of energy on the go.

Sometimes, this can be good news — like for the person who has to skip breakfast or the athlete who needs an energy boost before practice. Food bars will never beat a well-balanced meal or snack when it comes to meeting our nutrition needs. But many of them do contain more nutrients than a candy bar or a bag of chips. Likewise, some of the sports or energy drinks on the market today contain some vitamins and minerals.

**Know the Downsides**

So an occasional power drink or food bar is probably OK. But more does not mean better.

Here are some facts to keep in mind when it comes to food bars or energy drinks:

**They contain excessive sugar and calories.** Did you know that some energy bars and drinks contain hundreds of calories? That may be OK for athletes who burn lots of calories in high-intensity activities, like competitive cycling. But for many teens the extra sugar and calories just contribute to weight gain, not to mention tooth decay.

**Energy drinks are often full of caffeine.** Caffeine may be legal, but it is a stimulant drug. It can cause side effects like jitteriness, upset stomach, headaches, and sleep problems — all of which drag you down, not power you up! Large amounts of caffeine can have even more serious side effects (including fast or irregular heartbeats, high blood pressure, hallucinations, and seizures), especially for people who have certain medical conditions or who take medications or supplements.



**Food bars don't make good meal replacements.** You never really see someone eat an energy bar for dinner and then sit back with a satisfied grin. Nothing beats a real meal for both that well-fed feeling and the nutritional satisfaction your body needs.

Although lots of energy drinks and nutrition bars have some vitamins and minerals added, they can't give you all the different nutrients your body needs to grow, develop, play sports, and handle all the other stuff on your schedule. The only way to get that is through eating a balanced diet and not skipping meals.

**They may contain mysterious ingredients.** In addition to caffeine and sugar, some brands of energy drinks and food bars can have ingredients whose safety and effectiveness haven't been tested — things like guarana (a source of caffeine) and taurine (an amino acid thought to enhance caffeine's effect). Some contain herbal supplements that are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), such as ginseng.

These kinds of ingredients may cause problems for people who are taking certain medications or have a health condition. So play it safe. Always check the label carefully before you eat or drink any kind of energy supplement.

**They're expensive.** Though energy bars and drinks are everywhere these days, they don't come cheap. At about $3 a pop, you can get a better (and cheaper) energy boost by eating a whole-wheat bagel with cream cheese. And you can get better hydration by drinking 8 ounces of tap water. Other on-the-go foods that provide plenty of nutritional bang for the buck include trail mix, fresh or dried fruits, and whole-wheat breads and cereals.

**Cutting Through the Hype**

There's some clever marketing behind energy bars and drinks, and you've got to be a pretty savvy consumer to see through it. So be critical when reading labels. As with everything, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

If energy bars and drinks are becoming their own food group in your diet, remember — "all things in moderation." These products aren't harmful if you have them occasionally, but they're not the healthy choices the advertising hype makes them out to be either. **However, if you have a health condition like high blood pressure, heart problems, attention deficit disorder, seizures, or diabetes, talk to your doctor before consuming these products.**

The truth is, the best energy boost comes from healthy living. People who eat well, drink water, and get enough physical activity and rest will have plenty of energy — the natural way.

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