



Wired to the max

They are surging in popularity throughout the country, but what place do caffeinated drinks have in the hands of our children?

Kate Hamilton writes.

THANKFULLY, Matthew Penbross lives to tell the tale of what can go wrong when too many high-energy drinks are downed in quick succession.

In 2007, the then 28-year-old suffered a heart attack at a motocross event in Port Macquarie after drinking eight Red Bulls in five hours.

"[At the motocross event] I used the energy drinks as a 'pep-up' and to supplement my heavy training regime, to keep me going," Penbross said this week, as statewide debate continued over the widespread accessibility of caffeine-loaded drinks and tablets to young people.

"The combination of the exhilaration from racing and the energy drinks resulted in me short-circuiting myself.

"The second last race I felt soreness in my chest, so I decided to sit the race out. I told my friends about my chest pain and so I went and sat under a tree and drank some water.

"After the last race my heart was racing, and the last thing I remember was that I went up on stage for the presentation of awards, and I don't remember anything else after that."

Penbross's heart had stopped and he needed defibrillation from ambulance officers.

A cardiologist who treated Penbross at Newcastle's John Hunter Hospital said at the time it appeared excessive consumption of energy drinks had precipitated the attack.

Penbross, who has sworn off energy drinks all together, had some advice this week for consumers: "I would say monitor how much your intake is. Hopefully my story will make people aware to take heed of what can possibly

happen if you consume too many energy drinks, beyond the recommendations."

Penbross's father, Greg, was also keen to stress the dangers involved in excessive consumption of highly caffeinated drinks such as Red Bull.

"I'm dead against it," he said. "At sporting events I see parents and coaches feeding this stuff to kids, and it's just a really horrific thing."

Eight Red Bulls in five hours may seem extreme, but vodka Red Bulls are a popular drink among young adults and it's not hard to imagine revellers consuming two vodka Red Bulls an hour for four hours during a night out.

Five year 7 students from Quakers Hill, in Sydney's west, reportedly suffered side effects including dizziness and nausea after consuming energy drinks on their way to school earlier this month.

NSW Primary Industries Minister Ian Macdonald has since called for a ban on children buying highly caffeinated energy drinks in NSW, and concerned parents and citizens are also recommending that energy drinks be prohibited on school premises.

Helen Walton, spokesperson for the Federation of Parents and Citizens Associations of NSW, said that caffeine had no place in schools.

"Energy drinks and No-Doz are products high in caffeine that have no nutritional value, and therefore they don't fit nutritional standards upheld in schools" she said.

Walton said that students consuming such products were hyperactive and unable to focus. She said a conversation needed to occur between schools, the medical fraternity and stores selling the products, so that there was direction on how to deal with the problem.

In Australia, the energy-drink market, dominated by Frucor's V and Red Bull, is worth more than \$150 million annually, and is growing by 23 per cent a year.

Young adults use these drinks to

enhance concentration, stimulate the metabolism and increase alertness and performance.

Students feeling the pressure of assignment deadlines, long-distance travel to and from university and school and jobs continuing into the early hours of the morning are resorting to No-Doz for the same results. The tablets contain 100 milligrams of caffeine, similar to that of a strongly brewed cup of coffee.

Concern has been raised over the use of No-Doz at sporting events, where young people are reported to be taking two or more tablets at a time to get a burst of energy on the field.

Increased pulse rates from vigorous physical activity combined with large amounts of No-Doz can lead to arrhythmia, heart attacks and brain damage.

University students are also reported to be combining No-Doz tablets and sleeping pills.

Jason, a second-year student at The University of Newcastle, told *H2* he had occasionally taken two or more No-Doz tablets to stay awake and complete assignments at night, and had subsequently taken a couple of sleeping tablets to counteract the No-Doz.

Hunter Life Education executive officer David Baker said that a focus on positive, preventative drug education through a campaign launched on September 7 would hopefully make students aware of the negative effects of excessive caffeine.

Baker said the aim was to inform young people that with any drugs came the risk of addiction.

"And long-term, these products can affect mental health and lead to things like organ failure and low bone density," he said.

Going for a walk and getting fresh air, maintaining a nutritious diet, or even having a 15- to 30-minute power nap could be more effective in countering fatigue and enhancing concentration.