



Today's teenagers face intense pressure—from academic demands to sports and social media. As a result, many turn to caffeine in energy drinks, coffee and supplements, to stay alert and keep up. But while caffeine is widely accepted in adult culture, excessive intake can pose significant risks for teenagers whose bodies and brains are still developing.

As a school nurse, you're in a unique position to identify signs of caffeine misuse, initiate supportive conversations, and guide students toward healthier choices.

CAFFEINE TRENDS AMONG TEENS

A 12-year study by Dr. Hannah Hayes at Nationwide Children's Hospital (OH)¹ looked at trends of pediatric exposures to caffeine energy products reported to U.S. poison centers in individuals under 20 years old. Key findings included:



**17% increase
in poison
control calls.**



**633% surge in caffeine powder
pre-workout supplement incidents.**



**35% spike in energy
drink-related calls.**



**Teenagers 13-19 years old were
more likely to be medically admitted
or have a serious medical outcome.**

These numbers reflect a troubling trend: more teens are consuming high doses of caffeine—often without the knowledge to understand the risks.

KEY HEALTH RISKS² OF EXCESSIVE CAFFEINE USE IN TEENS

Sleep Disruption: Caffeine interferes with natural sleep patterns, a concern for teens who may struggle with late nights and early school schedules. Chronic sleep loss can impair regulation, concentration, immunity, and the ability to cope with stress.

Cardiovascular Effects: Elevated heart rate and blood pressure are common effects. Caffeine may trigger serious events like fainting or heart palpitations, which can lead to serious risks for students, including those with undiagnosed heart conditions.

Dependence & Withdrawal: Teens can become reliant on caffeine, developing withdrawal symptoms such as irritability, fatigue, and headaches when intake stops. This can impact their day-to-day lives and activities.

Mental Health Impact: High doses can heighten anxiety, jitteriness, and exacerbate existing emotional challenges.

Poor Nutrition: Energy drinks and supplements often contain excess sugar and lack nutrients, contributing to poor dietary habits.

Dehydration³: High levels of caffeine may contribute to dehydration by stimulating the body to release more liquid than usual.

EDUCATE STUDENTS: WHAT IS CAFFEINE?

Let students know that natural caffeine is a stimulant⁴ found in foods like coffee, tea, and chocolate. It works by **blocking adenosine**, the brain chemical that signals sleepiness. Unlike natural caffeine, synthetic caffeine is produced in a lab and commonly added to beverages like soda, juice, or energy drinks. While caffeine can enhance alertness in the short-term, large doses can lead to dehydration, anxiety, and poor sleep.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE:

School nurses can lead by example in modeling healthy behaviors and promoting alternatives to high caffeine drinks and foods. Keep water and healthy foods at your desk!

RED FLAG PRODUCTS TO WATCH FOR

- **Energy Drinks:** A single 16-oz energy drink may contain up to **240mg** of caffeine.
- **Energy Shots:** As much as 200mg in just 2 ounces (one shot).
- **Caffeine Powders:** Pure powder is especially dangerous—just **1 teaspoon = 28 cups of coffee**. The FDA warns against its use due to the risk of accidental overdose, which can include symptoms such as erratic heartbeat, seizures, and death. Vomiting, diarrhea, stupor, and disorientation are also symptoms of caffeine toxicity⁵.

Encourage students to **read labels** and question marketing claims⁶ about boosting energy levels, improving focus and concentration, and enhancing athletic performance. The **American Academy of Pediatrics recommends** teens avoid energy drinks entirely⁷.

COUNSELING STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL NURSES

1 Integrate Caffeine Checks into Wellness Visits

When students visit for fatigue, sleep issues, or headaches, gently ask about caffeine intake. Use open-ended questions to assess habits without judgment.

2 Collaborate with School Staff and Counselors

If you notice widespread use among a particular group (e.g., athletes), work with coaches or counselors to provide targeted education. For example, share observational insights and jointly monitor at-risk students through an intake tracking plan. Also deliver consistent messages from both nurses and coaches, as you will often see different sides of the student's behavior, performance, and health.

3 Host Mini-Lessons or Posters in the Health Office

Share information/visuals about caffeine content in popular drinks to spark curiosity and self-awareness.

4 Engage Parents When Appropriate

If a student appears dependent or at risk, a compassionate call to parents can help align efforts at school and home. It might also be helpful to emphasize modeling healthy choices for their kids.

HOW TO START THE CONVERSATION WITH STUDENTS

When you notice signs of fatigue, frequent energy drink use, or students reporting headaches or jitteriness, consider opening a dialogue with curiosity and empathy.

Sample Conversation Starters:

- “Hey, I just wanted to check in. I’ve noticed a lot of students are turning to caffeine — like energy drinks— to get through long days and late nights. Some say it helps with staying alert, but others mention things like trouble sleeping, headaches, or feeling anxious. I’m really interested in getting your take on this. What’s your relationship with caffeine like? What benefits do you get from the energy drinks?”
- “How do you feel after drinking that energy drink? Do you notice any changes in your sleep or focus? How many do you consume in a day or how many did you consume today?”
- “If you ever wanted to make a change or cut back, what would be your reasons for doing that? What would cutting back look like for you?”

These questions help build trust and open the door for students to reflect on their choices without feeling criticized.

HEALTHIER ALTERNATIVES TO RECOMMEND

You can guide students toward safer, sustainable energy sources⁸:

- **Water:** Dehydration often mimics fatigue. Suggest a refillable water bottle and regular hydration.
- **Healthy Foods:** Fruits (bananas, apples), whole grains, and protein-rich snacks like cottage cheese, Greek yogurt, and lean meats offer natural energy without a crash.
- **Movement:** Get up and walk around! Take regular brain breaks and move your body to feel energized.
- **Mindful Breaks:** Encourage students to take screen-free moments during the day to reset their focus.

FINAL THOUGHTS FOR SCHOOL NURSES

Teen caffeine use is rising—but so is your opportunity to make a difference. Through trusted relationships, evidence-based education, and approachable conversations, school nurses can help students understand the **real impact of caffeine** and feel empowered to make **healthier decisions**.

Your role is proactive, preventative, and deeply influential in shaping lifelong health-promoting behaviors for your teen students.

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