



The Consumer Voice in Europe

BEUC statement delivered at EFSA stakeholder meeting on the safety of caffeine (5th March 2015)

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EFSA Stakeholder Meeting on the Safety of Caffeine
Brussels, 5th March 2015
BEUC statement

BEUC, The European Consumer Organisation, wishes to thank EFSA for organising this meeting aimed at explaining and discussing the EFSA draft opinion on the safety of caffeine with interested stakeholders.

Case reports of fatalities following consumption of energy drinks have sparked concerns among consumers over the safety of caffeine and caffeinated food and drinks. Caffeine is widely available in a range of beverages (including coffee, tea, cocoa drinks, cola beverages and so-called 'energy drinks') but also in foods such as chocolate as well as in some food supplements. As the multiplication of dietary sources of caffeine, combined with particular patterns of consumption, may put consumers' health at risk, it is important that clear and consistent scientific advice be given on safe levels of caffeine intake and consumption patterns for different population sub-groups. Authoritative food safety bodies such as EFSA and national food safety agencies have a key role in that respect. As their expert opinions inform the development of policies and dietary recommendations to consumers, it is important that where those opinions differ, the reasons for that are openly debated and explained.

As non-scientific experts, we essentially looked at the EFSA draft opinion on the safety of caffeine through the prism of previous similar safety assessments. This comparative analysis raised a number of questions and today's meeting is the opportunity to discuss those.

For instance, the EFSA draft opinion considers it safe for adults to consume daily caffeine intakes from different sources of up to 400mg. However, an Expert Group on caffeine safety of the Australia New Zealand Food Authority¹ reported on risks of increased anxiety levels in adults at caffeine intakes above 210 mg per day.

On the co-consumption of caffeine and alcohol, the EFSA draft opinion concludes it is "*unlikely*" that caffeine interacts adversely with alcohol. However, some national agencies (Anses² in France, BfR³ in Germany) recommend consumers should avoid consuming caffeine or energy drinks (because of their caffeine content) and alcohol at the same time. Indeed Anses reports that "*mixing alcohol and caffeine [should be avoided] since this can promote several other risks, including masking the depressive effects of alcohol, alcohol dependence, dehydration, and impaired kidney*".

¹ <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/publications/Documents/safety%20aspects%20of%20dietary%20caffeine.pdf>

² <https://www.anses.fr/en/content/caffeine-and-health>

³ http://www.bfr.bund.de/en/press_information/2014/05/people_consuming_high_amounts_of_energy_drinks_ignore_the_pick_me_up_risk-189287.html

Eventually, regarding caffeine consumption in connection with physical activity, the EFSA draft opinion states “*single doses of caffeine up to 200mg do not raise safety concerns for adults also when consumed less than two hours before intense exercise*”. By contrast, Anses recommends consumers should avoid consuming caffeine in connection with physical exercise. Indeed, the French agency notes that “*during physical exercise, caffeine consumption is a cardiac risk factor in people with a pre-disposition for heart problems and brings about an increase in body temperature, which in turn increases the risk of heat stroke. For these reasons, caffeine should not be consumed during physical activity*”. According to the BfR, “*in combination with strenuous physical activity, [caffeine] consumption behaviour can also involve health risks. In particular, undesired effects on the cardiovascular system, partly due to dehydration, are possible with a high caffeine intake through energy drinks*”. The BfR further notes that caffeine’s promised effects on physical performance are precisely a driving factor for high caffeine intakes during physical exercise.

Risk communication is also a key feature of EFSA’s mandate. In that respect, the news stories published on the EFSA website play an important role in translating complex scientific advice into key messages accessible to a lay audience. It is all the more important as media often pick up from those news stories. While recognising the challenge of the exercise, we believe it is crucial not to over-shorten or over-simplify the scientific advice. Taking as an example the caffeine news story, it suggested that “*for children (3-10 years) and adolescents (10-18 years), daily intakes of 3mg per kg of body weight are considered safe*”. But in fact the full EFSA draft opinion acknowledges the lack of data to derive safe upper levels of intake for caffeine in children and adolescents and explains that caffeine intakes of no concern derived for acute consumption in adults have been used as a basis to derive daily caffeine intakes of no concern for children and adolescents.

Other food safety bodies have warned children are particularly at risk of adverse effects linked to caffeine intake such as neurological and cardiovascular problems. Caffeine also has a great impact on sleeping patterns and can affect school performance. Belgium’s Superior Health Council⁴ has recommended that “*for children prior to adolescence, an acceptable maximal daily intake of 2.5 mg per kg body weight is advisable*”. Both Health Canada⁵ and the Nordic Working Group on Food Toxicology and Risk Evaluation⁶ (NNT) identified a Lowest Observed Adverse Effect Level for anxiety in children at caffeine intakes of 2.5 mg/kg bw.

Against this background, we believe it is important for EFSA to explain why its draft opinion deviates from previous, more conservative risk assessments and we very much look forward to today’s discussions. Eventually, it will important to have a robust safety risk assessment at hand to inform any future policy decisions on controversial issues such as caffeine health claims and the marketing of energy drinks to children and adolescents.

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⁴ http://www.health.belgium.be/internet2Prd/groups/public/@public/@shc/documents/ie2divers/19076526_fr.pdf

⁵ <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/securit/addit/caf/food-caf-aliments-eng.php>

⁶ <http://www.mast.is/Uploads/document/Skyrslur/caffeineriskassessmentnordicchildren.pdf>