

Serious Concerns Over Alcoholic Beverages with Added Caffeine

Caffeinated alcoholic beverages, or CABs, are alcoholic beverages that contain caffeine as an additive and are packaged in combined form.

Alcoholic beverages to which caffeine has been added as a separate ingredient have raised health concerns at the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as well as in other federal, state, and local agencies.

On Nov. 17, 2010, FDA announced that it had sent warning letters to four companies that make malt versions of these beverages, advising them that the caffeine included as a separate ingredient is an “unsafe food additive.”

These warning letters were not directed at alcoholic beverages that only contain caffeine as a natural constituent of one or more of their ingredients, such as a coffee flavoring.

A Troubling Mix

According to data and expert opinion, caffeine can mask sensory cues that people may rely on to determine how intoxicated they are. This means that individuals drinking these beverages may consume more alcohol—and become more intoxicated—than they realize. At the same time, caffeine does not change blood alcohol content levels, and thus does not reduce the risk of harms associated with drinking alcohol.

Studies suggest that drinking caffeine and alcohol together may lead to hazardous and life-threatening behaviors. For example, serious concerns are raised about whether the combination of alcohol and caffeine is associated with an increased risk of alcohol-related consequences, including alcohol poisoning, sexual assault, and riding with a driver who is under the influence of alcohol.

Malt versions of premixed alcoholic



beverages come in containers holding between 12 and 32 liquid ounces. Some may also contain stimulant ingredients in addition to caffeine. Their advertised alcohol-by-volume value is as high as 12 percent, compared to standard beer’s usual value of 4 to 5 percent.

These alcoholic beverages are available in many states in convenience stores and other outlets. They often come in large, boldly colored cans comparable in size to “tall” cans of beer—or in containers resembling regular beer bottles.

FDA Warns Four Firms

FDA issued its November 2010 warning letters to four companies that make caffeinated alcoholic beverages: Charge Beverages Corp., New Century Brewing Co. LLC, Phusion Projects LLC (which does business as the Drink Four Brewing Co.), and United Brands.

The caffeinated malt beverages referenced in these warning letters are

- Core High Gravity HG Green
- Core High Gravity HG Orange
- Four Loko
- Joos
- Lemon Lime Core Spiked
- Moonshot (This product is labeled as “premium beer with caffeine”)
- Max

The manufacturers of these products have failed to show that the direct addition of caffeine to their malt beverages is “generally recognized as safe” by qualified experts. Rather, there is evidence that the combinations of caffeine and alcohol in these products pose a public health concern.

“Consumers should avoid these caffeinated alcoholic beverages, which do not meet the FDA’s standards for safety,” says Joshua M. Sharfstein, M.D., FDA’s principal deputy commissioner.

The agency has given the firms 15 days to respond to the warning letters and then may proceed to court to stop their sale. In addition, other alcoholic beverages containing added caffeine may be subject to agency action in the future if scientific data indicate that the use of caffeine in those products does not meet safety standards. [FDA](#)

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