

Energy Drinks Can No Longer Be Sold To Children, But Gamer Energy Supplements Can

By Jason England on 31 Aug 2018 at 2:36PM

[Editor's note: the names of children have been changed, and their faces blurred in the photography]

In recent times, UK public and political opinion has turned against high-sugar high-caffeine energy drinks. You may have seen supermarkets voluntarily ban the sale of such products to under-16s, encouraged by the combination of a high-profile Jamie Oliver campaign and findings in the British Medical Journal. “Our retailers are doing the right thing and now it’s time for government to step up,” Oliver commented at the time. Following which, **Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday launched a public consultation into making it illegal to sell the drinks to children under 18.**

“Legislating to end the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children would create a level playing field for businesses and create consistency, helping ensure that children do not have access to energy drinks in any shop,” the Department of Health & Social Care stated in the consultation overview.

However, if government does 'step up' then it will need to look broader than the canned, carbonated likes of Red Bull and Monster, the usual suspects in these conversations (largely because they're the most visible examples on the high street). **There is a booming industry of 'supplements' targeted solely at gamers old and young** – brands like X-Gamer, Stim Pack, SmartX, MOD and Gamma Labs G-Fuel – and these products, which can be in pill form or powdered drinks, have yet to attract the same level of attention.

These supplements are marketed promising "explosive energy" and have a higher caffeine content than the aforementioned canned energy drinks. The ingredients otherwise reveal them as near-identical formulations to what you’d see in pre-workout powders used by weightlifters. These substances are flying under the radar, and a big part of their market is younger gamers.



You may have seen the logos emblazoned on eSports team uniforms (and being labelled as a “**health sponsor**” while teams boast of 'supplementing their way to victory'), or noticed tubs of the product stacked around the backdrop of massive YouTube channels like **DramaAlert**. And you won't make it far into a contemporary gaming convention without finding a promotional stand handing out samples.

This is a market that has rose alongside video game competition as a spectator sport. eSports, regardless of the individual games, is well on its way to becoming established as serious worldwide competition, with an audience and an impact.

According to Fuse (The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health) research, children aged between 10-14 years who played video games were well aware of the link between energy drinks and gaming — supporting the need for “policy-level interventions.” Evidence for this is presented in **Children and Young People's**

Perceptions of Energy Drinks: A Qualitative Study. And public opinion is now starting to shift.

“The Science and Technology Committee are undertaking a review on energy drinks and Jamie Oliver and his team continue to campaign for a ban on under 16’s,” said Amelia A. Lake — associate director for Fuse and one of four co-writers of the above study. I asked Oliver's team for comment, but didn't get a reply.

The descriptor 'energy drink' is part of the problem, as it focuses studies and public attention too tightly in on carbonated, caffeinated fuel, the cans of Monster we're all familiar with. This needs to change, as these potent pills and powders should receive just as much scrutiny.

Where did gamer energy supplements come from? One story begins with a sports nutrition company that found an opportunity, and pivoted to it.

“We were an 'informed for sport' grade nutrition brand that had various health and fitness products,” said Matt Rees, CEO of UK-based supplement company X-Gamer. “About 3-4 years ago we started branching out to the gaming and digital community to try and improve on the carbonated and sugar-heavy canned products that were being so freely consumed.”

The sports nutrition pedigree behind X-Gamer shows in the products themselves — these are extremely similar to popular pre-workout supplements. The levels of caffeine involved, however, almost make you gibber just reading them.

Take X-Gamer’s Zomberry flavour X-Tubz — with 200mg of caffeine per serving, which is 100% of the recommended single intake dosage for an adult but 10% greater than the RDA for an average 16-year-old adolescent. You will find many of the same ingredients, such as L-Tyrosine and L-Carnatine — two amino acids that apparently improve your concentration and body’s ability to process energy — in products like MyProtein’s MyPre 2.0 and Optimum Nutrition’s Pre-workout formula. But these otherwise-similar products have nowhere near these caffeine levels.

Brand	Caffeine per serving	Caffeine per 100ml*	Percentage of RDA for adolescent
X-Gamer Zomberry	200mg	40mg	110%
G Fuel Ragin Gummy Fish	150mg	30mg	83.3%
GG Gamer Supps Acai Blueberry	100mg	20mg	55.5%
Red Bull (250ml can)	80mg	35.2mg	44.4%
Monster Energy (500ml can)	160mg	32mg	88.8%
MyProtein MyPre 2.0	175mg	3mg	79.5%
Optimum Nutrition Gld Standard Pre Workout	175mg	35mg	79.5%

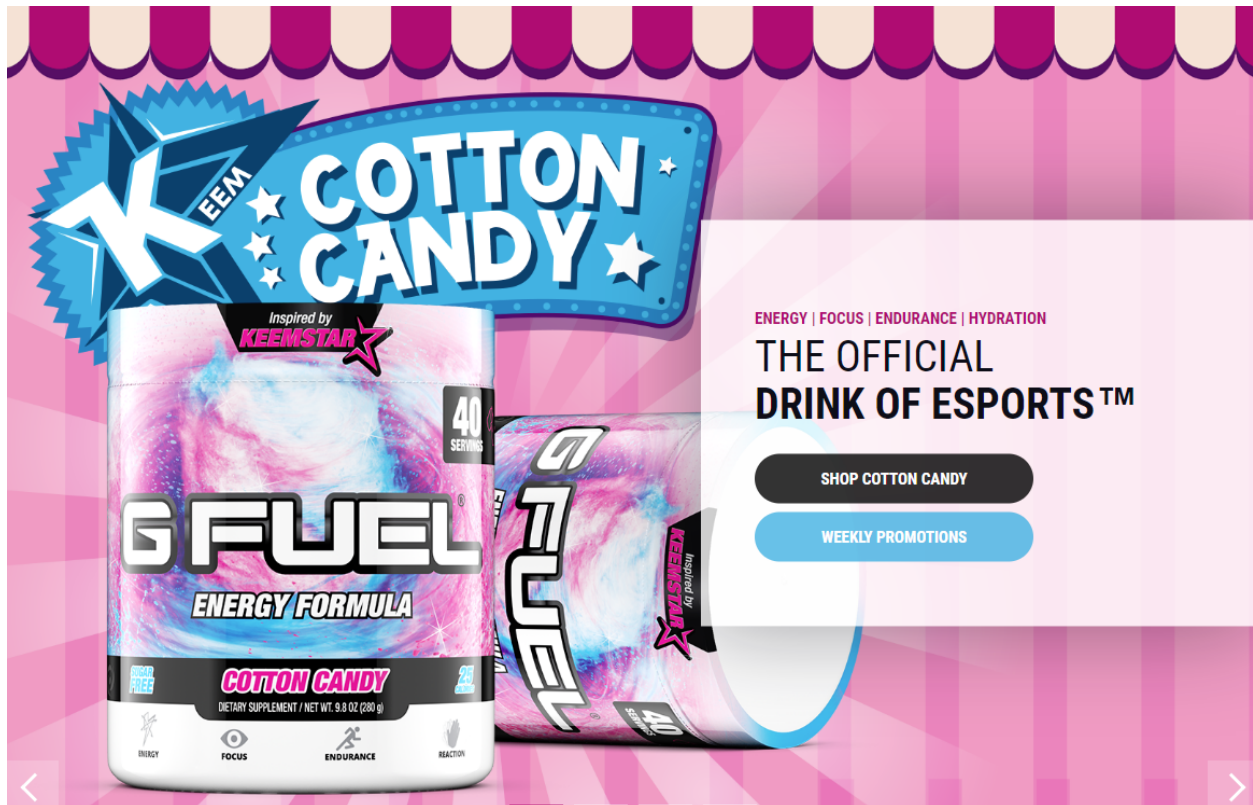
“We would describe our product as a cousin of the now classically titled pre-workout [formula], as performance requisites are similar,” Rees says. “However some ingredients do differ and levels will vary from product to product and brand to brand. It’s often the details in blend and the quality of ingredients that control the delivery and effects. We previously saw and have sold pre-workouts with caffeine amounts at maximum current RDAs and beyond in one serving.”

You may also notice, despite the quantities of caffeine involved, an absence of caffeine references in the product descriptions and marketing, even though we’re talking about something with **150% more caffeine** per serving than a can of Red Bull. The promotional material describes the product as a “non-carbonated, powdered energy and focus matrix.”

This description does later comply with mandatory EFSA guidelines — by placing a caffeine warning in the bottom third of the page, under “usage and directions.” Amelia Lake thinks “there could be more information about the caffeine content,” and suggests this would be in-line with even current **government guidance**.

Throughout my conversation with Rees, he took care to repeatedly emphasise that X-Gamer’s target audience is “18-35.” But while X-Gamer is compliant in following the somewhat loose guidelines when it comes to promoting their products, the very nature of a gamer-centric product attracts a far younger audience than that.

Research by the **Entertainment Software Association** and **Interactive Software Federation of Europe** shows video game audiences have matured. But this same data suggests 29% of the 'gamer' population are under the age of 18, and 21% of UK gamers are below the age of 14 (these figures come from Q3 2017). That’s a huge chunk of the market and one that should be protected from being targeted by products like this.



The short-term adverse effects of caffeine on adolescents **reportedly include** gastrointestinal problems, behavioural changes and anxiety, and that's just the stuff thrown up so far. It would seem that these gamer supplement companies have a responsibility to ensure their highly caffeinated products are not ending up in the hands of adolescents. But under the UK's current regulatory system, they don't have to do much at all.

“There are no laws here currently — so we don't and are not required to ID customers,” Rees says. “But we do opt to be as sensible and supportive around the welfare of the young as possible.” This includes verbal communication informing expo teams to not sell their products to children, but such guidelines cannot be 100% effective and, by their own admission, means they may still advertise to adolescents.

I put this to Rees, and he responded: “Our marketing does remain blanket focused on the pro eSports, lifestyle gaming & digital communities but we do not, have not and will never deliberately target children or younger adolescents.”

With this statement in mind, I decided to put X-Gamer's stands to the test at Insomnia 63 — a huge gaming convention dedicated to eSports, meeting YouTubers, and playing games old and new.

Looking on at X-Gamer's stand, the marketing tactics are simple but effective — offer free samples and entice customers with cheaper on-stand offers that come with a free shaker. And in support of Rees's claim about X-Gamer's target audience, many people taking advantage of the samples did seem to fall within the 18-35 age range.

However, the stand still received its fair share of children who sampled and purchased with no problems. The two youngest customers I met were 11 and 12 years old – the former was happily handed a full-size sample in a shaker, and the latter bought a tub with the help of his dad.

Alongside this, X-Gamer ran a giveaway to win a lifetime supply of their supplement, which 14-year-old Jim had no trouble entering.

“He got himself a shaker for winning a round of Fortnite, and they've entered him into a competition to win a lifetime's supply of these...energy drinks...” Jim's mum told me, exasperated at the idea of a constantly hyperactive son.



Over the course of the day, children were given this product freely and not once challenged. X-Gamer may say the right things, but the reality of their direct marketing at conventions like this is quite different, and far from concerns about the “welfare of the young.” However, gamer energy supplements have at least attracted some attention from the wider research community.

“With the increased interest in energy drinks and their short and long-term health effects – as well as the link with gamers and the young age of gamers – this needs to be addressed. We will begin work in this area soon,” Amelia Lake confirmed via email.

In its current state, the sugar tax aims to reduce consumption of 'full fat' energy drinks. But it doesn't cover gamer energy supplements like X-Gamer, which according to Rees indicates “a healthier product than many beverage-based offerings.”

Supplements such as this are, for adults, a personal choice. Plenty of gym-fanciers use similar products with few ill effects. Personally I won't be guzzling down a tub of Gamma Labs G-Fuel anytime soon, but my point is not that these products shouldn't exist. Rather these supplements need to be researched and scrutinised as fully as their carbonated counterparts.

You could also argue that convention organisers owe a greater duty of care to minors at their events, especially when (as is frequently the case) they're being dropped off and left unaccompanied for a few hours.

The eventual goal has to be common sense governance of 'gamer supplements' alongside energy drinks — ensuring adolescents are not consuming products with unnecessary ingredients and potentially harmful effects.

Somewhat to my surprise, X-Gamer's Rees ends our conversation by implying that he might agree. “As a family man with two teenagers under my care, I endorse all health and wellbeing regulations for young people.”

Until the case is made and these products are subject to regulation (when it comes to minors, at least), you'll just have to use your own common sense. No-one needs a drink that's 40% caffeine and, if you think it'll somehow make you better at Overwatch, I've got a bridge to sell that really helps with respawn times.

