

# Caffeine, Energy Drinks and Mental Wellbeing

**Caffeine can increase alertness, but the effect is personal.** The same drink may feel useful on one day and uncomfortable on another. Dose, timing, sleep, food, medication, hormones, stress and individual sensitivity all matter.

## Where caffeine appears

Coffee, tea, cola, energy drinks, chocolate, pre-workout products, some supplements and some pain or cold remedies may contain caffeine. Serving size and strength vary widely. A large café drink may contain several servings, and labels may state caffeine per 100 ml rather than per container.

## Possible short-term effects

- Greater alertness, wakefulness or concentration.
- Restlessness, shaking, sweating, nausea or reflux.
- Faster heartbeat, palpitations or feeling physically “on edge”.
- More frequent urination or disrupted appetite.
- Difficulty falling asleep or lighter, less restorative sleep.

## Caffeine and anxiety

Caffeine can create body sensations that resemble anxiety, including a racing heart, tension and rapid thoughts. When someone is already stressed or monitoring bodily sensations closely, those changes may feel alarming. This does not mean caffeine causes every anxious feeling, but it is worth noticing patterns.

## ADHD, autism and sensory experience

Some people with ADHD describe caffeine as settling or focusing; others feel overstimulated, sleepy, irritable or unchanged. Autistic people may experience interoception, taste, temperature and stimulation differently. Personal response is more useful than assumptions. Caffeine is not a substitute for prescribed ADHD treatment, and combinations should be discussed with a prescriber or pharmacist.

## Sleep and the tiredness loop

Caffeine can remain active for hours. A late drink may delay sleep, reduce sleep depth and increase next-day tiredness, leading to more caffeine. Instead of imposing a universal cut-off, compare timing with sleep onset, waking, dreams, night-time anxiety and how restored you feel.

## Energy drinks need extra attention

Energy drinks may combine caffeine with sugar, sweeteners and other stimulatory ingredients. Large cans and concentrated “shots” can make the total easy to underestimate. Mixing them with alcohol can mask feelings of intoxication without making a person less impaired. Children and young people need particular protection from high-caffeine drinks.

## Food, hydration and routine

Using caffeine instead of food, fluids or rest may provide a temporary lift while leaving the underlying need unmet. If eating is difficult, pair a tolerated drink with a safe food where possible. Do not remove a reliable drink abruptly when it contributes meaningful fluid or energy; plan an acceptable replacement first.

## Pregnancy, health and medicines

UK guidance advises limiting caffeine during pregnancy. People with heart rhythm problems, severe reflux, sleep disorders, panic symptoms or other conditions may need individual advice. Caffeine can interact with some medicines and supplements. Check with a pharmacist, midwife or prescriber rather than relying on social-media advice.

## Reducing without a crash

Stopping suddenly can cause headache, tiredness, low mood, irritability and poor concentration. A gradual reduction may be easier: reduce portion size, dilute, change one drink at a time, alternate caffeinated and decaffeinated choices, or move the final caffeinated drink earlier. Withdrawal is temporary, but seek advice if symptoms are severe or unusual.

## A seven-day curiosity check

- **Drink, size and time:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Food and hydration around it:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Alertness or focus afterwards:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Anxiety, body sensations or digestion:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **Sleep and next-morning energy:** \_\_\_\_\_
- **One gentle adjustment to test:** \_\_\_\_\_

## Questions before changing anything

- What job is caffeine doing for me: taste, routine, focus, comfort, energy or appetite suppression?
- Am I counting the whole can, mug, scoop or combination of products?
- Would changing dose, timing or food alongside it be enough?
- Could tiredness need medical assessment rather than more stimulation?
- Will reducing this drink remove fluid, calories, safety or predictability I still need?

## When to seek help

Get urgent medical advice for severe or persistent palpitations, chest pain, fainting, confusion, seizures or suspected caffeine overdose. Call 999 for a life-threatening emergency; NHS 111 can advise when help is urgent but not immediately life-threatening.

## A message from Maggie

*Caffeine does not have to be labelled good or bad. It may be helping you get through a demanding day, while also affecting sleep or anxiety. Understanding that pattern gives you choices. Change one thing gently, protect the drinks and foods that feel safe, and ask for support when tiredness or physical symptoms persist.*

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## Sources and further information

NHS - Sleep, pregnancy nutrition, anxiety and medicine information: [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)  
Food Standards Agency - Caffeine and high-caffeine drink labelling: [food.gov.uk](https://www.food.gov.uk)  
British Dietetic Association - Caffeine and hydration information: [bda.uk.com](https://www.bda.uk.com)  
For personal advice speak with a pharmacist, GP, midwife or registered dietitian.

Current UK guidance checked September 2026. Educational information only; this guide does not replace individual medical or dietetic advice.