

Experts warn against

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By Joe Frollo Wed, 08/01/2012 - 4:06pm Athletes often look for a quick boost to gain an edge. Some including youth players whose bodies can't handle the elevated levels of caffeine are turning to caffeinated energy drinks to provide a burst prior to practices and games. This is a short-sighted and sometimes dangerous approach, said St. Vincent Sports Performance sports dietician Lindsay Langford. A proper diet and adequate hydration provide young athletes all the energy they need. Caffeinated energy drinks increase heart rate and can lead to an irregular heartbeat, Langford said. Minors often have difficulty seeing the warning signs or can become more easily addicted to the effects. That's why she doesn't recommend caffeinated drinks to anyone under age 18. Kids on caffeinated drinks get so amped up, they can't focus on the game, Langford said. They just wind up with a nervous, jittery body. The proper approach, according to Langford, is drinking water beforehand, using sports drinks that restore carbohydrates and electrolytes during activity and replacing nutrients afterward with chocolate milk or a healthy meal. If you are properly fueled going into the event, sports drinks are all you need to replace what you lose and keep energy levels up, she said. After the game is when it is important to recover any lost protein. As president of the Heartland Football League, an 800-player organization in Omaha, Neb., John Manna meets each preseason with club members about safety precautions. He discusses concussion awareness, proper hydration, inclement weather measures and the dangers of kids ingesting caffeine. We have a lot of different programs and emergency procedures, Manna said. Dealing with an over-caffeinated player is one of them. We encourage families not to let their kids drink that stuff. We have had instances where kids are throwing up on the field. Thankfully, we haven't had anything more serious than that. Players in the Heartland Football League are immediately removed from games or practices if they show signs of being over-caffeinated. Some of those signs are similar to concussion symptoms including inability to concentrate and nausea. Manna reinforces good eating habits and better choices for pregame drinks. Some kids, though, succumb to peer pressure or copying what they see at school and on TV. For others, it's become a habit reinforced by past actions. Some kids eat the same meal or go to the same restaurant the night before a game if they think they play well because of it, Manna said. Some kids have said they take the energy drinks because they had a good practice or a good game one time, so they keep doing it. What about the other times when they felt sick? Why not stop doing it because your body is telling you that? Michael Koenig is president of the Omaha (Neb.) Storm, a club with 250 players. People have told him about flag players in the league as young as 6 who take caffeinated energy drinks. We strongly discourage this, and we let the parents know that they are not giving their kids any advantage, Koenig said. Drinking that stuff at such a young age can be detrimental to a kid's health. The jitters it produces are more of a detriment to the player than anything they would get out of it. Studies have shown that adults in certain situations can see enhanced performance, according to John Eric Smith, an associate principle scientist with the Gatorade Sports Science Institute. Those same studies, including one by the American College of Sports Medicine, found that individuals who ingest caffeinated energy drinks more often suffer mistakes because of over-arousal, an

increased heart rate, increased blood pressure and a disrupted sleep cycle. Another study by the American Academy of Pediatrics warns about increased anxiety and arrhythmias as a result of children who take caffeinated energy drinks. Overuse can lead to caffeine toxicity, and doses of 200 to 400 milligrams can be lethal. Caffeine can also affect a child's developing neurological and cardiovascular systems. Most health experts do not recommend caffeinated drinks for children under 18. Ingestion rates high enough to elicit performance benefits can also lead to increased anxiety, jitteriness, lightheadedness and decrements in performance, Smith said. Carbohydrates and fat are the primary fuels for the human body, Smith said, with carbohydrates the dominant energy provider during short-term exercise. Replenishing carbohydrates during exercise is the best way to maintain performance. While caffeinated energy drinks and products may seem like a quick fix to fatigue, they are in fact a short-term facade hiding the body's needs, Smith said. Proper nutrition, training, sleep and recovery habits are key for athletes to avoid fatigue and perform at their best. The first goal is to convince parents of the dangers, Koenig said. Leagues can outlaw the drinks at practice and game fields, but players are consuming them at home and during car rides. The last thing we want to do is find out a kid has a heart condition and has a reaction from drinking too much caffeine, Koenig said.