

Be kinder than necessary, for everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle.



A can of Four Loko

Slight girls as young as 16 and big guys in their mid-20s are being carried into a local emergency room, drunk and unconscious due to a caffeinated, high-alcohol drink that is becoming popular here.

For each of the past two weekends, emergency room doctors at Lancaster General have treated anywhere from four to six people who have passed out after drinking a beverage called Four Loko.

"They're nearly comatose from alcohol poisoning," said Dr. Mike Reihart, an LGH emergency physician who has treated some of the young people.

"I've been practicing emergency medicine for 13 years in Lancaster," he said, "and I have yet to see one alcoholic beverage that has caused so much intoxication in such a short amount of time."

Emergency crews are noticing it, too.

"We are seeing a dramatic increase in calls related to Four Loko," said Stephanie Brown, operations director for the Lancaster Emergency Medical Services Association, which has ambulances and medic units in the county.

Last weekend, LEMSA crews responded to nine calls related to people drinking Four Loko.

Four Loko is a mix of a caffeinated energy drink and a high-alcohol beverage. It comes in a colorful, tall can and in fruity flavors, such as blue raspberry and watermelon.

It has a 12 percent alcohol content, more than twice that of most beers.

Drinking one 23.5-ounce can of Four Loko is the equivalent to drinking 4.7 beers, glasses of wine or shots of liquor, according to a drink calculator by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

In fact, its nickname is "liquid cocaine" because users say drinking three to four cans gives the same feeling as snorting cocaine.

Four Loko is creating a growing buzz on local college campuses.

"I heard about it a little bit last semester and now, this year, I'm hearing about it more and more," said John Baltzer, an alcohol and other drug counselor at Millersville University.

"It feels kind of like a wave," he said. "You get that sense sometimes of, 'Oh boy, here it comes.' "

At Franklin & Marshall College, Dr. Amy Myers first heard of the drink a few months ago. It has quickly become a concern, said Myers, medical director of health services and a physician at the college.

"Kids get into trouble quicker with it because they have the stimulant of the caffeine on board so they don't recognize the effects of the alcohol as quickly," she said.

At LGH, Reihart said parents and friends of the emergency room patients have expressed disbelief at the drink's effects.

Friends came in with a man in his mid-20s who was rendered unconscious by the drink. They said the man was trying to reach a common goal of drinking four Four Lokos.

"They said he was trying to get the fourth one down and he ended up losing consciousness at three," Reihart said.

A parent of a 16-year-old held a can of the drink and said, "It doesn't even look like alcohol. I wouldn't look twice at this in my refrigerator."

Reihart added, "It's floral and colorful, but it's very dangerous."

The dangers come from the combination of high-alcohol content and ingredients commonly found in energy drinks, including caffeine, taurine and guarana.

"The people I'm talking to talk about Four Loko and there is this feeling of foreboding," said Baltzer of MU. "It's this thing that everyone is doing now and it's a little scary. It's a great drunk but they get out of control. I'm hearing anecdotal stuff that it's messing

people up."

Four Loko overrides the body's protective reflexes, Reihart said.

Normally, drinking alcohol makes people drowsy and they fall asleep and stop drinking.

But Four Loko's caffeine and energy drink ingredients keep people awake for a longer time, allowing them to ingest more of the high-alcohol drink.

"Their blood-alcohol content gets a little bit higher and just kind of lingers in their system longer," Myers said.

And the caffeine in the drink can cause heart palpitations and other problems, Reihart said.

The effects of the drink have created a stir elsewhere.

A St. Petersburg, Fla., man told police he had mixed liquor with Four Loko and smoked marijuana before he ran a red light, killing another man and the man's three sons two months ago.

In Delaware County, the Rev. William Rocky Brown III, who is running for the state House, said Four Loko and drinks like it are fueling violence and pledged this summer to lead a campaign to get them off the shelves of stores in Chester.

Keith Rutt, owner of Wheatland Distributors on Columbia Avenue, said his customers have not embraced Four Loko, which is selling slowly.

Cases, which include 12 of the 23.5-ounce cans, cost around \$25. A single can costs around \$2.50 to \$3 at local bottle shops.

People who come in looking for Four Loko usually have heard about its effects, Rutt said, but clerks do warn consumers about the high-alcohol content.

Reihart added his own warning: "This is going to make you dumb, sick and throw up. We could add unconscious to that, too."