

Is Caffeine Good For You?

presented by the Salem Evening News

Of all the food rituals that people enjoy, starting the day with a cup of joe ranks as one of the highest. Not only does its pleasing aroma and warm temperature help to fight off the winter chill, but it's caffeine content can give you a mental boost, may improve your workouts, and help wake you up as you head out the door.

Sounds pretty harmless, right? Yet with so many Americans punctuating their day with numerous java jolts, health experts wonder if too much caffeine can possibly have a negative effect on health.

Caffeine is a stimulant, and is the only food substance that actually mimics the body's stress response. In small doses, caffeine increases heart rate and alertness, and research suggests that athletes may indeed get a better workout if they have a little caffeine before hitting the gym.

In large doses, however, caffeine can cause GI distress (also known as "coffee stomach"), anxiety, heart racing, and swings in blood sugar. Caffeine is also a diuretic, which means that it causes you to lose water faster, and can contribute to dehydration.

The other catch is that caffeine is both physically and psychologically addictive, so if you don't get your daily fix, you may experience headaches, nausea and fatigue and (understandably) irritability between 12 and 224 hours after your last dose.

Although caffeine does indeed provide an extra boost to start their day, many people mistakenly reach for a cup of joe or can of soda to help fight fatigue or satisfy their hunger, when in fact they would be better off reaching for whole foods and drinking some water instead. I hear many clients tell me that they feel tired in the afternoon, and a good way to beat that is to stretch at work, have some water and a light snack- a dip in blood sugar 3-4 hours after a meal is common, and rather than fueling with caffeine, try using healthy foods and sleep as your primary means of energy.



Caffeine Content of Selected Beverages:

Food Item	Mg Caffeine in 12 oz
Truck Stop Coffee	525
Gourmet	263
Regular Coffee	160-208
Espresso (1 cup)	40
Jolt Soda	71
Mountain Dew	54
Mellow Yellow	52
Coke	46
Diet Coke	41
Dr. Pepper	41
Iced Tea	22-36
Decaf Coffee	2-8
Chocolate Milk	8

Source: National Coffee Association, 1997

Are there any health consequences of drinking too much caffeine? Although the issue is still hotly debated among health professionals, a recent review in the March 2001 issue of Tufts University's Health and Nutrition Letter reported the following:

Caffeine and Bone Loss- Research indicates that although caffeine slightly increases the amount of calcium that is lost by the bones, this can easily be counteracted by adding milk to your coffee.

Caffeine and Cancer- A European review of dozens of caffeine studies in the 1990s found no positive association between drinking coffee and increasing your risk of certain cancers (there has long been speculation that bladder cancer may be associated to caffeine intake).

Caffeine and Heart Disease- A Finnish study found that even those people who averaged 5 to 6 cups of coffee per day were not at a higher risk for developing heart disease than non coffee drinkers.

Caffeine and Miscarriage- There has always been some question about how much caffeine is safe for pregnant women; a new Swedish study suggests that even modest caffeine intakes (the equivalent of 1 to 3 cups of coffee) may raise miscarriage risk by 30 percent, and the risk increases with each additional cup of coffee.

Caffeine and Headaches- When taken with prescribed headache medication, caffeine has been shown to actually bolster the medication's ability to act on the headache (by increasing circulation). A recent study at the San Francisco Health Clinic found that subjects who consumed a combination of ibuprofen and caffeine reported faster relief than those who took ibuprofen alone.