

A Cup O' Joe to Your
Health?
The Latest Buzz on
Caffeine

by Susan Spencer

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“I like coffee, I like tea,” starts the old familiar song. For many, it’s hard to get going in the morning without a cup or two of a caffeinated beverage.

While the stimulating effect of caffeine may keep us going, its impact on health remains controversial. The good news is that for most people who consume less than the recommended maximum of 300 milligrams a day (about two or three 8-ounce cups of coffee), it provides some health benefits. But women who are pregnant, or have heart disease or certain digestive problems, should avoid or limit to a small amount the caffeine that they ingest. In these cases, less is better.

The good and the bad about caffeine

Kelly O’Connor, a registered dietician at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore, said that the positive effects of moderate caffeine consumption include a temporary “high,” as caffeine increases the production of the neurotransmitter dopamine in your brain. Caffeine also provides relief from headaches by closing blood vessels in your brain, which is why pain relievers often

include it. In addition, Kelly added, “There is some research showing that as little as one cup of coffee a day might be beneficial in decreasing the risk of Alzheimer’s disease.”

Other studies report that caffeine drinkers are less likely to develop Parkinson’s disease, type 2 diabetes, gallstones and cancers of the liver, colon and skin. Caffeine also increases endurance while running and bicycling.

On the downside, caffeine can contribute to heart problems by increasing your heart rate and blood pressure. It can also interfere with the blood sugar levels of people with diabetes. Postmenopausal women should be aware that it increases the risk of osteoporosis. And since consuming more than 300 milligrams of caffeine a day has been linked to miscarriages, pregnant women should avoid having more than a small cup or two of coffee daily.

Even if you’re not pregnant and don’t have health problems, you can tell that you’ve had too much caffeine if you feel nauseous or jittery, if you have increased anxiety or if it’s difficult to sleep, according to registered dietician and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association, Constance Brown-Riggs.

How Much Caffeine Is in Your Routine?

Black or green tea: 40 milligrams per 8 ounces
Brewed coffee: 80-200 milligrams per 8 ounces (a Starbucks tall coffee is 12 ounces, with 260 milligrams of caffeine)
Coke, 12-ounce can: 34 milligrams
Diet Coke, 12-ounce can: 45 milligrams
Pepsi, 12-ounce can: 38 milligrams
Diet Pepsi, 12-ounce can: 36 milligrams
Mountain Dew, 12-ounce can: 55 milligrams
Dark chocolate, 1.5-ounce bar: 30 milligrams
Red Bull: 160 milligrams
SoBe No Fear: 175 milligrams
Excedrin: 65 milligrams
Bayer Select Maximum Strength: 65 milligrams
Midol Menstrual Maximum Strength: 60 milligrams

Did you know...

Caffeinated drinks used to be considered a diuretic (a substance that increases the flow of urine), but recent studies have concluded that this is only true at very high levels of caffeine consumption. However, it can have a laxative effect, said Nicole Cormier, a registered dietician in Hyannis, Massachusetts. So it's best not to be too far from a bathroom if you're drinking a lot.

Surprises about how much caffeine is in what

Knowing how much caffeine is in a product can be tricky. "Caffeine is usually never on the label," Kelly said. "If you're someone who has to limit caffeine, you'll probably have to look it up." (See our sidebar, How Much Caffeine Is in Your Routine?)


Constance said people might be surprised to find that 8 ounces of coffee ice cream has 60 to 84 milligrams of caffeine. "Most people think it's coffee-flavored with no caffeine," she said.

Another surprise: "People think espresso is much higher in caffeine than regular coffee," Constance said.

"The reality is you're only drinking 2 ounces of espresso, which has 80 milligrams of caffeine, compared to 8 ounces of coffee with up to 200 milligrams."

Summing up

Kelly said that when you drink caffeine in soft drinks or in coffee with sweetener or cream, you're loading up on empty calories. She recommends getting your caffeine from foods like dark chocolate or green tea—foods that have their own antioxidants and other nutrition benefits.

"Our best advice is that when you consume caffeine, do so in moderation," Kelly said, "and try to choose a product that may give you some additional nutritional value as a bonus." 

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