

Coffee and health

The coffee debate is an ongoing one and has been around for literally hundreds of years. Coffee is good for you, then it's bad, then it is good again ... Coffee has been blamed for a lot —growth problems, heart diseases, cancer, impotence etcetera. And now we see some more recent studies that coffee may protect against melanoma, heart disease, multiple sclerosis, type 2 diabetes, liver disease, prostate cancer, Alzheimer's, computer-related back pain, Parkinson's disease, and so on. Coffee also appears to improve cognitive function and decrease the risk of depression.



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Coffee, or better caffeine, is a drug, albeit a mild one, a soft drug, but still a drug. It's probably the most commonly used one, socially and legally accepted throughout the world. Caffeine is a natural stimulant that is found in coffee, but present too in tea, chocolate and soft drinks, so the total amount of your daily caffeine intake could be quite something more than you would think. As it is a drug, addiction and overdose, dependence and withdrawal symptoms are possibilities we have to consider as being possible.

First the good news: addiction as a pathological and compulsive form of use, has not been documented in humans. I do not think a lot of crimes are committed in order to get a shot of coffee. Physical dependence however is quite possible, and in my opinion quite frequent as studies have shown that even the consumption of one cup of coffee a day can lead to this dependence, triggering withdrawal symptoms. These withdrawal symptoms can include headaches, muscle pain, stiffness, lethargy, nausea, vomiting, depressed mood, concentration problems and marked irritability. If you, like me, have a hard time waking up without coffee, it could just be that we are just fighting our withdrawal symptoms!

That this happens after one cup of coffee is very improbable because most people take more than one cup a day and caffeine tolerance levels go up very fast. The sleep disruption tolerance effects of caffeine (you take a lot of coffee to keep awake, but you have to take more each time, or you take a lot of coffee at night and still can go to sleep) can develop very quickly and complete tolerance is reached taking 9 to 12 cups a day.

Apart from a slight physical addiction, drinking coffee may promote a behavioural addiction as well. Your social environment in which coffee is consumed (at home, with your friends, at work) and the feelings that accompany it, may play a role too.

Should we be worried?

Too much coffee (or better caffeine) can cause anxiety, insomnia, jitteriness, heart palpitations, trembling, headaches and migraines. If you are taking more than 5 cups a day and have these symptoms you could try to lower your dose or stop. If you take muscle relaxants or antidepressants, or when pregnant, when you have sleep issues or uncontrolled diabetes, you better avoid caffeine too. I am not a medical doctor so you better go and check with one.



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The good news of high doses of caffeine producing unpleasant sensations is that it discourages people from taking more, so we mostly do not have any problems controlling our caffeine intake. Most people do not struggle to control their caffeine intake (as is the case with other, more addictive substances). And if you want to stop totally, the severity of withdrawal symptoms usually peaks within the first two days and disappear after about 10.

The benefits

Apart of just enjoying the taste and flavour, people drinking coffee experience an improved brain function that expresses itself in more alertness, better short-term recall, reaction time, concentration and motivation. That's why you see a lot of coffee being drunk in the morning and at the work floor. Coffee boosts your metabolism and fat burning. Coffee can increase tolerance to fatigue and improve exercise performance. It improves your mood. For some people it may have some medical benefits as well as it is said that It may also reduce the risk of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, protect against heart disease and type 2 diabetes. But then again, I am not a doctor.

Despite these benefits, it should be clear that too much caffeine per day may do more harm than good, but the same could be said about anything.