

The Buzz on Caffeine: How Caffeine Affects Your Health

If you entered your college years without acquiring a taste for caffeine, late nights studying may kick off a caffeine habit. But what exactly is the deal with caffeine? Is it a harmless habit or something to worry about?

What is caffeine?

Caffeine is a natural stimulant found in coffee, tea, chocolate, many soft drinks and some medications. It's estimated that about 80% of the US population consumes some form of caffeine daily. The average American consumes about 230 milligrams of caffeine a day, about what is found in two 12-ounce cups of brewed coffee. The effects of caffeine kick in within about 15 minutes of ingesting it, and last for several hours.

How does caffeine affect your body?

Caffeine has three main physiologic effects:

- ❖ Stimulates your central nervous system
- ❖ Causes fat to be released from your fat stores (although unfortunately not enough to produce weight loss!)
- ❖ Causes your kidneys to release more urine

Because of its affects as a stimulant, caffeine can make you feel more alert, but in excess can cause restless "jitters" and difficulty sleeping in susceptible people. It may also cause your heart to beat faster and make you feel nervous and irritable.

Some research suggests that too much caffeine may also raise blood pressure, particularly in those who don't regularly use it. Those who do regularly consume caffeine seem to develop a tolerance to it, however, so the blood pressure elevating effects of caffeine may not be lasting.

Because caffeine is a diuretic, which means it causes you to urinate more, beverages containing caffeine are not the best hydration fluids for exercise.

Is caffeine bad for your health?

No scientific evidence has linked moderate caffeine use to any health problem, including cardiovascular disease, fibrocystic breast disease, cancer or birth defects. There is some concern that excessive caffeine intake may sap your bones of calcium. One study of older women found that an intake of about three cups of coffee a day lead to bone loss in the spine. Very high caffeine intakes (roughly the equivalent of 6 or more cups of coffee per day) may be linked to higher rates of miscarriage and headaches.

One thing's for certain, aside from tea, which does offer some health benefits, caffeinated foods and beverages offer little positive nutrition, which alone should be a reason to limit them. To play it safe, many doctors recommend limiting caffeine to about 200 milligrams per day, or the amount found in roughly two 12-ounce cups of coffee. See "Caffeine Countdown" below for a caffeine comparison of different foods and beverages.

What happens when you stop using caffeine?

If someone with a sizable caffeine habits decides to cut back, certain uncomfortable symptoms are likely to occur. Caffeine is an addictive substance, and without it you're likely to get a pretty decent headache if you cut it out cold turkey. You may also feel anxious, tired and depressed. Caffeine withdrawal usually resolves within about 24 to 48 hours of your last "dose." It may be possible to lessen withdrawal symptoms by gradually cutting back on caffeine one dose at a time.

Caffeine Countdown

Item	Average Milligrams (mg) of caffeine
Coffee (8ounce cup)	
Brewed	95
Instant	47
Decaffeinated, brewed	2.4
Teas (8 ounce cup)	
Brewed, U.S. brands	47
Brewed, imported	60
Cola (12 ounces)	37
Chocolate milk (8 oz)	5
Milk chocolate (1.5 oz)	9
Dark chocolate, semisweet (1 oz)	17.5