

Caffeine – How little, how much for you?

Caffeine is a naturally occurring substance in certain plants such as cocoa beans, tea leaves, and kola nuts. Most caffeine is consumed in beverages – coffee, tea, soft drinks, and chocolate. Caffeine is also an ingredient in many over-the-counter and prescription drugs. Guarana and mate – both herbal supplements – also contain caffeine.

Over the years many studies have explored the connection between caffeine and health. No scientific evidence has been found to link caffeine intake to any health risk, including cancer, cardiovascular disease, fibrocystic breast disease, osteoporosis, and birth defects. And no studies have shown that caffeine causes attention deficit disorder in children. Anecdotally, many have had improvements in conditions such as benign fibrocystic breast disease by regulating caffeine intake.

Caffeine-containing beverages have a diuretic effect – increasing water loss from the body through urination. Caffeine also is touted as a cathartic bowel stimulant. The more caffeine consumed, the greater potential for increased urination or defecation. Excessive caffeine intake may cause “coffee jitters,” anxiety, and insomnia. Caffeine also may speed the heart rate temporarily. These physical effects do not last long since caffeine does not accumulate in the body. Most is excreted within 3-4 hours.

How much caffeine is “too much” is an individual matter. Caffeine sensitivity depends on the amount and frequency of caffeine intake, body weight, physical conditions, and overall anxiety level. Tolerance to caffeine develops over time. A regular coffee drinker may not notice the effects as quickly as someone who drinks just an occasional cup. For most healthy adults, moderate amounts of caffeine – 200 to 300 milligrams a day or about 2 cups of coffee – pose no physical problems.

If pregnant or nursing, it is a good idea to go easy on the caffeine. Caffeine passes through the placenta to the baby and into breast milk. If you have a medical problem, you should ask your health care provider to guide you on caffeine consumption, especially if you suffer from high blood pressure, gastritis, or ulcers. Older adults should be aware that sensitivity to caffeine may increase with age. At any age, the caffeine in beverages can add up, especially if they take the place of more healthful beverages.

If you have been consuming a lot of coffee, cut back gradually to allow your body to adjust. Abrupt withdrawal of caffeine may lead to headaches or drowsiness in some for a few days. Drink instant or decaffeinated coffee which contains less caffeine than regular coffee. Try ½ regular – ½ decaffeinated coffee. Brew tea for a shorter time – a 1 minute brew may contain ½ the caffeine as a 3 minute brew contains. Drink decaffeinated or herbal tea. Read soft drink labels carefully as 75% of soft drinks contain caffeine. Caffeine is found in both caramel-colored and clear soft drinks. Read medication labels carefully. One dose of over-the-counter pain reliever may contain as much caffeine as 1-2 cups of coffee. Keep water handy to sip. Refill your cup with water instead of more coffee or tea.

How much caffeine?

Food/Beverage	Serving Size	Average (mg)	Range
Coffee	8 ounces		
Brewed		85	65-120
Instant		75	60-85
Decaffeinated		3	1-4
Espresso	2 ounces	80	60-100
Cappuccino	2 ounces	80	60-100
Moccachino	2 ounces	90	70-110
Tea	8 ounces		
Black tea		40	30-60
Decaffeinated black tea		4	< 5
Green tea		40	30-50
Iced tea, unsweetened		13	
Iced tea, ready mix		30	
Soft drinks	12 ounces	35	30-60
Cocoa beverage	5 ounces	5	2-20
Chocolate milk	8 ounces	5	2-7
Milk chocolate	1 ounce	5	1-15
Dark chocolate	1 ounce	20	5-35
Chocolate syrup	1 ounce	4	