# Coffee

## Facts and Controversies

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n this article, we review current literature on coffee, both regular and decaffeinated, and its potential effects in humans. Moderate coffee consumption is believed to have no persistent effect on blood pressure. Large intake of coffee may increase total cholesterol levels; boiled coffee increases cholesterol levels more than filtered coffee. Consuming more than four cups per day may be associated with increased risk of acute myocardial infarction. There appears to be an association between urinary bladder cancer and coffee consumption. No association was found between ingestion of coffee and incidence of duodenal ulcer and ulcerative colitis. Increased coffee consumption by pregnant women appears to decrease fetal birth weight. Fetal heart rate, respiration, and both maternal and fetal anemia are increased with coffee consumption but coffee has not been shown to be teratogenic. Coffee consumption appears to pose no particular threat in most people if consumed in moderation. Naturally decaffeinated, filter-brewed coffee further diminishes its potential harmful effects. (Arch Fam Med. 1993;2:317-322)

Coffee represents one of the world's leading commodities, and is considered by many to be America's national drink. Nearly 5.4 million kilograms of coffee is produced in the world every year.1 Northern Scandinavian countries consume the most coffee. In 1989, over 50% of the US population older than 10 years drank coffee, the majority of whom were older than 30 years. Drinkers of decaffeinated coffee make up another 16.7% of the population. In the United States, nearly 5 kg of coffee is consumed per person per year, representing a total annual expenditure of nearly \$2.5 billion.<sup>1,2</sup> In an effort to evaluate coffee's effects on humans, we conducted a search of world medical literature in English in the last 10 years using the databases of the National Library of Medicine and included articles on coffee with positive and negative findings in this review.

To assess the effects of coffee consump-

tion on humans, we evaluated the population consuming coffee. One study of coffee drinkers in California found that men prefer caffeinated coffee at an early age and later switch to decaffeinated coffee, whereas women prefer decaffeinated coffee at all ages.1 Furthermore, comparisons among coffee drinkers indicated that those who drink caffeinated coffee are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, eat saturated fats and foods high in cholesterol, and exercise less frequently than those who drink decaffeinated coffee.<sup>3</sup> These findings suggest that the population of caffeinated coffee drinkers in general might have atherogenic behaviors that would put them at high risk for coronary heart disease. This possibility should be kept in mind when interpreting results from studies done on coffee and health.3-6

## COMPOSITION OF COFFEE

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Many factors influence the chemical composition of the beverage coffee, including degree of roasting, brewing conditions, additives (such as sugar and cream), contaminants, and the nature and origin of the coffee itself. The percentage of volatile substances in household brew again varies according to method of preparation; in practice, however, 40% to 100% of the volatile substances present in dry coffee are extractable. Over 700 volatile substances have been identified in coffee, including carbonyl compounds, alcohols, acids, esters, terpenoid compounds, nitrogen- and sulfur-containing compounds, hydrocarbons, and heterocyclic and aromatic compounds. Of the nonvolatile soluble substances, caffeine is physiologically the most important. However, the other nonvolatile soluble substances include other purines, glycosides, lipids, melanoidins, and acids such as nicotinic and chlorogenic acids. Contaminants in green coffee include pesticides, nitrosamines, organic solvents, and mycotoxins due to the presence of moldy beans, although roasting destroys 80% to 99% of the mycotoxins. Some of these contaminants have recognized toxicologic and carcinogenic effects.1

## CAFFEINE

As previously mentioned, the primary component of physiological concern in coffee is caffeine (1,3,7trimethylxanthine). The typical caffeine content of brewed coffee is 85 to 100 mg per 175-mL(6-oz) cup and of instant coffee is 65 mg per cup. By comparison, there is 40 mg of caffeine in a cup of tea and 45 mg in 350 mL. (12 oz) of caffeinated soft drink. Decaffeinated coffee has less than 2 mg of caffeine per cup. Caffeine is completely absorbed from the gastrointestinal tract, reaching a peak concentration in blood within 30 to 60 minutes after ingestion. Its concentration. and hence its effect, is additive with half-lives ranging from 2 to 12 hours and averaging 4 to 6 hours. Moderately heavy coffee drinkers have mean plasma caffeine concentrations of 4.4 mg/L over 24 hours. The effect of caffeine varies for each individual depending on how much is consumed, the schedule of consumption, and the elimination half-life.

## PHARMACOLOGIC EFFECTS

In humans, caffeine is metabolized into more than 25 metabolites, the primary ones being paraxanthine, theobromine, and theophylline. These xanthine derivatives (1) act as an adenosine receptor antagonist, (2) inhibit cyclic nucleotide phosphodiesterase activity, (3) mobilize calcium, and (4) inhibit monoamine oxidase activity.79 The most important effect of caffeine is antagonism to adenosine receptor found in the brain, kidney, cardiovascular system, respiratory system, gastrointestinal system, and adipose tissue. Adenosine inhibits cvclic adenosine monophosphate (cAMP) production within a cell by binding to high-affinity A1 receptors, or conversely, stimulates cAMP production within a cell by binding to low-affinity A2 receptors.7 Cyclic adenosine monophosphate acts as a second messenger to activate a cAMPdependent protein kinase, which in turn phosphorylates selected proteins within the cell. This phosphorylation may be inhibitory or stimulatory for that particular protein depending on the protein. Through this second messenger mechanism, a variety of cellular functions can be regulated. Caffeine nonselectively blocks both adenosine receptors (A1 and A2), thereby preventing any second messenger function. By binding to high-affinity A1 receptors, caffeine prevents adenosine from inhibiting cAMP production. Conversely, by binding to low-affinity A2 receptors, caffeine prevents adenosine from stimulating cAMP production. Thus, caffeine disrupts the second messenger function of cAMP with these mechanisms. Furthermore, the inhibitory effect of caffeine on cyclic nucleotide phosphodiesterase prevents the cellular breakdown of cAMP and thereby prolongs its effect.<sup>10</sup> Through these actions, caffeine exerts its varied effects such as diuresis, central nervous system stimulation, increased cardiac contractility, bronchodilatation, and analgesia as well as other functions.<sup>7,9</sup>

Tolerance to many of these and other effects of caffeine develop within a few days, such that coffee drinkers exhibit withdrawal symptoms when its intake is discontinued. Daily dose at which withdrawal occurs is approximately 21/2 cups of coffee.11 Symptoms of withdrawal include headache, drowsiness, fatigue, decreased performance, dysphoric mood change, muscle pain/stiffness, flulike symptoms, nausea/vomiting, anxiety, and caffeine craving.<sup>7,12,13</sup> Physicians should be aware that symptoms of caffeine withdrawal can occur in patients who are taking caffeine-containing prescription or overthe-counter analgesic or antihistaminic preparations after they stop taking them.

## EPIDEMIOLOGIC STUDIES

Numerous epidemiologic and animal research studies have been conducted to assess the harmful effects of long-term coffee ingestion. Both case-control and cohort studies have been used to evaluate coffee's effects on humans, but, as yet, no clear picture has emerged. Often these studies are plagued with problems, resulting in inconclusive findings. Standards of measurement for the prescribed "one cup" of coffee are often neglected, or, instead, dosedependency of coffee toward the related outcome is ignored. Brewing methods are not always standardized or even clarified. Furthermore, confounding factors, such as smoking, are not always evaluated, nor is the study group completely characterized. Because of these problems in design, many incongruencies are found in the literature.

#### ANIMAL STUDIES

Animal research studies have their own problems. Both quantitative and qualitative differences in metabolism of caffeine, for example, can be seen between humans and experi-

#### Association of Coffee With Various Conditions\*

Condition	Association		
	Probable	None Probable	Inconclusive
Cancer	Urinary bladder	Breast, colon, rectal	Pancreatic, ovarian
Cardiovascular and lipid disorders	Transient increase in BP in nontolerant individuals, increased total and LDL cholesterol, increased risk of acute myocardial infarction with >4 cups per day	Permanent increase in BP in normotensive subjects, HDL cholesterol level	Elevated BP in hypertensive subjects, enhanced thrombogenesis, cardiac arrhythmias, risk of CVD
Gastrointestinal effects	Increased cholecystokinin concentration, increased gallbladder contractions	Duodenal ulcer, ulcerative colitis, gallstones	and the Western Miles
Mental and behavioral effects	Anxiety, depression, panic disorders, sleep disruption	Rossies alle Manuelle es	Somnolence
Pregnancy	Reduced fetal birth weight with >3 cups per day, increased fetal heart rate, increased fetal respiration rate, maternal and fetal anemia	Teratogenic potential	Infertility, prematurity
Other effects	Osteoporosis with >2 cups per day, diuresis, bronchodilatation, analgesia, chromosomal aberrations and sister chromatid exchange in vitro, fibrocystic breast disease	Improvement in alcholol-related incidents	Decrease in alcoholism, impaired sports performance, reduced immune functions, reduced growth of thyroid neoplasms

\*BP indicates blood pressure; LDL, low-density lipoprotein; HDL, high-density lipoprotein; and CVD, cardiovascular disease.

mental animals.<sup>1</sup> In addition, many in vitro studies on lower organisms are extrapolated to higher organisms and do not address in vivo equivalency. Thus, research data on the effect of coffee on humans must be viewed with this in mind.

#### CARCINOGENIC POTENTIAL

The International Agency for Research on Cancer of the World Health Organization evaluated coffee's carcinogenic risk to humans. Its evaluation of the literature through March 1990 led it to conclude that there is limited evidence in humans that coffee drinking is carcinogenic in the urinary bladder; however, potential bias or chance cannot be ruled out.1 Further studies support this finding and add that smoking is an effect modulator.14,15 The Agency's review of the effect of coffee on pancreatic and ovarian cancer concludes that there is inadequate evidence to determine the presence or absence of causal association between coffee and cancer. There is substantial evidence to conclude that coffee does not cause cancer of the breast. However, the Agency concluded that there is a positive association between coffee intake and fibrocystic breast disease, but cautioned that differences in disease detection between drinkers and nondrinkers of coffee and may account for this finding. Nevertheless, decreasing the amount of caffeine in the diet may be beneficial in decreasing breast pain associated with fibrocystic breast disease.<sup>16</sup> Other recent studies have concluded that coffee is not a contributing risk factor for developing colon or rectal cancer.<sup>17</sup> Thus, only urinary bladder cancer has any association with coffee ingestion, and that association is not without potential bias.

#### CARDIOVASCULAR AND LIPID EFFECTS

Several investigations have evaluated the cardiovascular disease risk of coffee consumption. Several studies indicate that coffee ingestion, regardless of brewing method, does acutely increase blood pressure in individuals who have not developed tolerance, but that once tolerance is reached, blood pressure returns to baseline.<sup>1,7,18,19</sup> In other studies, a small 1– to 5–mm Hg decrease in blood pressure was observed in normotensive adults who replaced regular with decaffeinated coffee.<sup>20-22</sup> Many studies conclude that a decrease in coffee/ caffeine intake may be helpful in lowering blood pressure in subjects with hypertension but this is not a consistent finding.<sup>23</sup>

Analysis of the influence of coffee on serum lipids suggests that increased intake of coffee contributes to an increase in total serum cholesterol levels.24,25 There is no difference between caffeinated and decaffeinated coffee in terms of the effects on blood lipids, which implies that the effects of coffee on lipids are due to component(s) other than caffeine.<sup>26,27</sup> Filtering coffee appears to decrease its potentially harmful effect of raising levels of low-density lipoprotein and total serum cholesterol,<sup>7,24,28</sup> whereas boiling coffee appears to increase this negative effect.<sup>1,7,24,29,30</sup> High-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels appear to be unrelated to coffee consumption.<sup>29,31-34</sup> Unfortunately, these studies have some design problems in that not all of them checked levels of low- and high-density lipoprotein and triglyceride, nor did they all account for brewing method, amount consumed, or gender.

Risk of having an acute myocardial infarction appears to be weakly associated with ingesting more than four cups of coffee per day. This association has been found to exist independent of smoking, diabetes mellitus, hyperlipidemia, hypertension, body mass index, or years of education.<sup>35-38</sup> However, no comparison was made between decaffeinated and regular coffee, nor was the brewing method specified.

The effect of coffee on hemostasis remains unclear, but it may enhance thrombotic tendency.<sup>39-41</sup> Caffeine may induce cardiac arrhythmia in humans.<sup>42</sup> Of the studies done to evaluate its effect on cardiovascular disease itself, four studies<sup>42-45</sup> concluded that coffee is a safe beverage and is not a risk factor for cardiovascular disease; yet, again, four other studies<sup>43,46-48</sup> concluded that coffee ingestion is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease, but only when over six cups per day is consumed.

## GASTROINTESTINAL EFFECTS

No association has been found between coffee ingestion, regular or decaffeinated, and the incidence of duodenal ulcer or ulcerative colitis.<sup>49,50</sup> Although ingestion of coffee does appear to bring on dyspepsic symptoms in some,<sup>49,51</sup> it does not appear to affect any present ulcer activity.<sup>49,52</sup>

#### MENTAL AND BEHAVIORAL EFFECTS

Caffeine exacerbates the symptoms of anxiety<sup>53</sup> and depression<sup>54</sup> and can make panic disorders worse.<sup>55</sup> Two to four cups of coffee at bedtime can induce significant disruption of sleep but individual differences occur within a wide range.<sup>56</sup> This effect is compatible with the stimulant properties of caffeine.<sup>57</sup> Some people, on the other hand, get an idiosyncratic reaction and develop somnolence following caffeine ingestion.<sup>58</sup>

#### **COFFEE AND PREGNANCY**

Studies of the effect of coffee on infertility and prematurity are inconclusive.<sup>59-61</sup> However, ingestion of over three cups of coffee per day appears to decrease fetal birth weight.<sup>1,7,62-64</sup> Coffee, both decaffeinated and regular, increases fetal heart rate and respiration.<sup>65</sup> Another study found coffee to be independently associated with increased maternal and fetal anemia.<sup>64</sup> Coffee has not been shown to be teratogenic.<sup>1,7,63</sup>

#### OTHER EFFECTS

Various other studies have examined the effect of coffee on the body. Coffee ingestion of more than two cups per day has been implicated as a risk factor for osteoporosis because of the effect of caffeine on increasing urinary calcium output.66 Caffeinated coffee's diuretic effects have been shown not to be mediated by atrial naturetic factor.<sup>67</sup> Both regular and decaffeinated coffee give rise to increments in plasma cholecystokinin concentration and increase gallbladder contractions.68 No association was found between consumption of coffee and incidence of gallstones.<sup>69</sup> Finally, one study suggests that coffee may modify various immune functions.70

Mutagenicity studies on the effects of coffee indicate that brewed (both decaffeinated and regular) and instant coffee induce chromosomal aberrations and sister chromatic exchange in cultured human lymphocytes and/or cultured mammalian cells.<sup>1</sup> Other studies conclude that these sister chromatid exchanges are not mediated by dicarbonyls alone or by peroxides alone.<sup>65,66,71,72</sup>

#### THERAPEUTIC POTENTIAL

The therapeutic potential of coffee has also been examined. One study evaluated its effect on intoxicated individuals and noted that coffee did not decrease alcohol-induced drivingrelated incidents.<sup>73</sup> A preliminary study suggests that regular intake of coffee might help decrease alcoholism.<sup>74</sup> No conclusive evidence has been found to substantiate the belief that coffee/caffeine helps in the performance of sports; however, the Na-

tional Collegiate Athletic Association of the United States has adopted bans on the use of caffeine prior to performance.75,76 Known therapeutic uses of caffeinated coffee include antiasthmatic therapy and orthostatic and postprandial hypotension therapy, as well as analgesic therapy for migraine headaches.7,77-79 A recent study has reported that caffeine can augment the analgesic effect of aspirin.<sup>80</sup> One study suggests that coffee may even play a protective role against the development of benign or malignant thyroid neoplasms by inhibiting cell growth through cAMPmediated mechanisms.<sup>81</sup> The **Table** summarizes the effects of coffee and association between coffee drinking and various conditions.

In conclusion, coffee appears to pose no particular threat in most people when consumed in moderation (fewer than four cups per day) but individual differences exist, and some may be at risk of developing untoward effects. The potential dangers of caffeine could be further diminished by drinking only naturally decaffeinated, filter-brewed coffee.

Accepted for publication December 14, 1992.

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