

Coffee brims with benefit, Harvard researchers say

Susan Salisbury THE PALM BEACH POST

Drink up, coffee lovers. Not only is coffee aromatic and delicious, it's good for you. While coffee was once considered questionable for your health, researchers at Harvard Medical School have found the beloved beverage is actually healthful in moderation. That means a few cups a day. At about 20 cents per six-ounce cup, coffee is a good deal if you brew it yourself.

Harvard researchers say drinking coffee may help prevent diseases such as:

Cancer: Some studies have found coffee drinkers have lower rates of colon and rectal cancers and are 50 per cent less likely to get liver cancer than coffee abstainers.

Type 2 diabetes: Coffee is thought to contain chemicals that lower blood sugar, so heavy coffee drinkers may be half as likely to get diabetes as those who drink little or no coffee. Coffee also may increase your resting metabolism rate, which could help prevent diabetes.

Parkinson's disease: Coffee seems to help protect men from Parkinson's disease, but not women. The difference might be due to estrogen, researchers say.

Heart disease: Coffee is not linked to the development of heart disease. In the past few years, Harvard scientists say, coffee has been shown to be safe even for heart attack survivors. Scientists think antioxidants in coffee may reduce inflammation and protect blood vessel walls.

Life span: Recent studies suggest that drinking coffee decreases the risk of premature death, especially in women. Women who drank at least five to seven cups a week had a death rate 26 per cent lower than non-consumers, according to results of a large investigation by researchers in Spain and at Harvard Medical School.

It's not only Harvard researchers who are touting the brew's benefits. Last month, a study led by Neal Freedman of the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md., showed that people with chronic hepatitis C and advanced liver disease who drank three or more cups of coffee a day cut their risk of the disease progressing by 53 per cent.

Although caffeine might be considered the "active ingredient" in coffee, coffee is only 2 per cent caffeine and 98 per cent "other stuff," including more than 1,000 different compounds such as vitamins, minerals and amino acids. It even contains fibre. Each cup contains from 1.1 to 1.8 grams of soluble dietary fibre, the kind that dissolves in water and helps prevent cholesterol from being absorbed by the intestines, according to researchers at the Spanish National Research Council in Madrid.

Do researchers have any words of caution? Yes – although regular coffee drinking isn't harmful for most people, that might not hold true for pregnant women. Research has linked miscarriage to caffeine consumption of 200 milligrams or more per day. A typical cup of coffee has 100 to 150 milligrams, Harvard reports.

Of course, we like to be able to justify our morning addiction as healthful, even if the truth is we can't get moving without it! Is it possible to be caffeine-addicted? Yes, University of Florida professor and director of toxicology Bruce Goldberger says. "It is one of the most commonly ingested drugs worldwide. It is addictive. One example of that is if you consume a lot of caffeine, then you don't, you start to crave it. If you consume a lot of caffeine, and it is not working, then you need to consume more," Goldberger said.

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