

Advice for every body

BY CHRISTINE GABLE

Not your average joe

Can a cup (or two) of coffee a day keep the doctor away?

Health pariah or misunderstood elixir? Coffee has a mixed reputation. It's considered mildly addictive by some and was once thought to increase the risk for ailments ranging from cardiovascular problems to cancer.

But coffee has recently been the subject of numerous headlines touting its health benefits. So should you imbibe with gusto or abstain? Opt for decaf or go for the real McCoy? Here's some help in filtering through the current research, much of which comes to positive conclusions about coffee consumption.

The antioxidant effect

Every day, people around the world drink more than 1.3 billion cups of coffee, helping to make caffeine the most commonly consumed stimulant on the planet. In the United States, "for the average person, 71 percent of the caffeine in their diet comes from coffee," says Joe Vinson, a professor of chemistry at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania. And with coffee topping the list of antioxidant sources in the North American diet, the benefits of a cup or two may be wide ranging.

Recent research has cleared coffee of contributing to rheumatoid arthritis and pancreatic, colon, and rectal cancer; in fact, regular consumption of decaffeinated coffee has actually been associated with a lower incidence of

rectal cancer. Moderate doses of caffeine and caffeinated coffee, meanwhile, may protect against Parkinson's disease. And both regular and decaf have been associated with a lower risk of gout among men.

When it comes to heart health, fears about routinely drinking coffee may not be

Women were also the winners in a French study published in *Neurology* in August. Researchers found that women age 65 and older who drank more than three cups of caffeinated coffee or tea per day had a smaller decline in their mental acuity over four years than those who drank less than one cup per day. No effect was found among the men in the study.

But some of the biggest news is the finding that coffee consumption may help prevent type 2 diabetes. Among men and women who down several cups daily, studies published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology* and the *International Journal of Obesity* found a reduced risk of this disease.

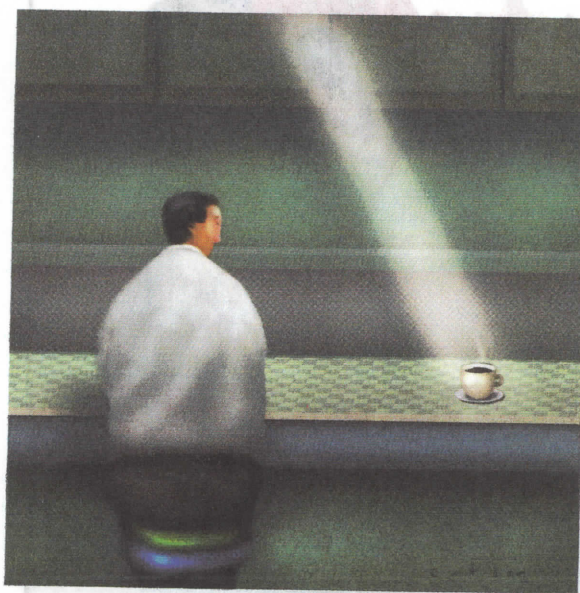
Regular or decaf?

Researchers do caution that coffee is not a panacea, that more studies need to be done, and that people should drink coffee in moderation, if at all. And Vinson notes that caffeine is a stimulant that can have negative

as well as positive effects.

"It makes you more alert, short-term memory is improved, the ability to work or to strenuously exercise improves. This is all from the caffeine," he says. "However, by itself, caffeine will quickly affect your heart because it raises your blood pressure, short-term."

Caffeine itself is a source of antioxidants, but opting for decaf doesn't mean forgoing all the



warranted. A 2006 study by Harvard researchers found no evidence that long-term coffee consumption among 84,000 women and 44,000 men increased the risk of coronary heart disease. Another group, who analyzed data from the Iowa Women's Health Study, found that one to three cups daily may protect against heart and inflammatory conditions among postmenopausal women.

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Coffee facts

- Coffee is believed to have originated in the Kefa region of Ethiopia.
- Cultivation in Yemen dates back to at least the 15th century.
- The first coffee house in Europe opened in Vienna in the 17th century.
- Brazil is the planet's leading coffee supplier.
- Hawaii is the only U.S. state where coffee is grown commercially.
- It takes 42 coffee beans to make one cup of espresso.
- In dollar terms, coffee is the second-largest export in the world, after oil.



benefits of regular coffee. "Italian researchers in a 2003 *Journal of Nutrition* article showed that removal of caffeine from espresso coffee reduced total antioxidant capacity values by about 25 to 30 percent, likely because of the antioxidant capacity of caffeine," says Michael Murphy, professor of nutrition at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and a member of the Rotary Club of Urbana, Ill., USA. "However, decaffeinated espresso still had a total antioxidant capacity much greater than any other beverage they tested," including fruit juices, tea, and soft drinks.

As with everything, of course, moderation is key. Although coffee can play a part in a healthful diet, it can't single-handedly take on diabetes or forgetfulness. "From a nutritional perspective," Murphy stresses, "it is more important that one's overall diet, both food and beverages, be varied and balanced to meet an individual's nutrient requirements than it is that this diet include or avoid any particular food or beverage." ■

CHRISTINE GABLE writes about nutrition from Lancaster County, Pa., USA.

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