Your Employee and Family Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

The highs and lows of caffeine

In our overworked and sleep-deprived society caffeine has become a quick fix for many people. It wakes up the brain, improves concentration and can make us feel temporarily more alert, even happier.



But, if you're using caffeine as an energy crutch, it may be time to take a closer look at the amount you're choosing to take in each day and also where caffeine is "sneaking in." If your caffeine habit totals more than 500 to 600 milligrams per day, you should be cutting back. This is particularly important if you're bothered by headaches, sleep issues or anxiety. Like most things, moderation is key and by being aware you'll be able to enjoy your caffeine guilt free.

Caffeine the good

Caffeine has been plagued with a bad reputation in the past and has been linked to high blood pressure, cholesterol and heart problems, especially in connection to smoking—i.e., lots of people associated having a smoke break with drinking coffee. Once smoking is removed from the equation, however, research shows that there are lots of potential "perks" to caffeine. Moderate caffeine consumption can provide a:

Brain boost. Caffeine improves your alertness and reaction time by stimulating the central nervous system. This makes you feel more alert, relaxed and helps you concentrate.

Pick-me-up. Caffeine can have a positive effect on your mood, causing increased happiness, energy and sociability. These effects depend on the amount of caffeine consumed and your individual tolerance.

Stamina source. Research reveals that caffeine may actually improve your athletic ability. As a natural stimulant, caffeine helps with your endurance and acts as a mild pain reliever so you may feel less sore after your workout.

Shield from disease. Reputable studies have shown that moderate coffee consumption may actually provide some protection against coronary disease, Parkinson's disease, type 2 diabetes, colon and liver cancer and gallstones. Green tea and coffee are also loaded with antioxidants, which help with your overall health.

Caffeine the bad

For most people moderate amounts of caffeine aren't harmful. But, heavy caffeine use—more than three cups a day—can cause:

Insomnia. For some, drinking caffeinated beverages can make it harder to fall asleep and affect sleep quality. This can create an unwelcome cycle of masking sleep deprivation with caffeine, which will continue to impact your sleep and other areas of your life. To break this cycle, try to reduce the amount of caffeine you take in a day and stop drinking beverages with caffeine at least six hours before going to bed. When you're tired just try catching a nap or going to bed earlier instead of reaching for more caffeine.

Dependency. Caffeine is addictive so if you try to stop drinking coffee, tea, energy drinks or colas, you may suffer withdrawal symptoms including bad headaches, muscles aches, anxiety and irritability. Keep your addiction to a minimum by slowly weaning yourself off your beverage of choice and working towards a more modest daily intake.

Fertility problems. Although research is inconclusive in this area, research suggests that more than 300 milligrams of caffeine a day increases a woman's risk of conception problems, miscarriages and low weight babies. Doctors recommend that women who are pregnant or planning to become pregnant should either eliminate or cut down on caffeine.

Osteoporosis. Caffeine can cause your body to excrete calcium and this loss over time may start to affect your bones. If you must have your caffeine, bone up on calcium by adding extra milk to each cup of coffee or tea to offset the calcium lost.

Other caffeine concerns include: heartburn, anxiety and stomach problems. These effects depend on the individual and usually accompany heavy caffeine use. Some medications may also be affected by caffeine so be sure to talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you're on medication and have a high caffeine intake.

Surprising sources

Although we are all well aware of the usual caffeine suspects like coffee, tea and many energy drinks, it can actually pop up in some pretty unexpected places. Look out for:

Pain relievers. Caffeine is used in many pain medicine because it helps the body absorb the drugs quickly, bringing fast pain relief. A little caffeine can beat that headache, but if you take more than the labels suggest you are getting more than you need. Two common pain relief tablets can contain as much as 130 milligrams of caffeine, which is the same as an espresso shot—so stick to the recommended amounts.

Non-cola pop. Colas are well-known for their caffeine content, but less suspecting, sweeter sodas also pack a caffeine punch. Because of the sugar content in these beverages though, they're probably wise to drink only occasionally anyways.

Chocolate. Caffeine is found naturally in cocoa beans so all chocolate contains caffeine, but the darker the chocolate, the higher the amount. Your average dark chocolate bar has 31 milligrams of caffeine, which is almost as much as a can of cola. Chocolate ice cream has much less with usually only 3 milligrams.

For caffeine lovers out there, you will be pleased to know that caffeine can make you a better athlete, chase away the blues and provide some protection from serious health concerns. But, this doesn't mean that it's bottoms up: the secret behind all of this is moderation. The next time your energy drops and you start making your third trip to the drink machine at work or the coffee shop down the street, think about eating a fresh piece of fruit or getting some exercise—both of which are great ways to get that energy boost you're looking for without going into caffeine overload.

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