

Live Healthy and Be Well!

“Enjoy a good cup of coffee without guilt”

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“I drink coffee, because without it, basically, I’m just a cranky toddler whose blankie is in the washer.” --anonymous coffee drinker

Last month I talked about wanting to base the next few columns on some information I have come across about things that seem to confer health benefits and may even prevent disease. Much of this is based on a good book I read recently by Dr. Sanjiv Chopra titled *The Big 5* - which presents “...five simple things you can do to live a longer, healthier life.” For this month, we will present some good benefits that seem to come from drinking coffee.

If you are like me, you start most days with a hot cup of coffee – and for many of us, it seems a necessary ritual. We have heard over the years much conflicting information – coffee is good for us, then a study comes out that says it is bad. When we were young, we were sometimes told “you are too young to drink coffee,” or “...it will stunt your growth.” So, many of us did not start until college age – but since that time, it has remained an enjoyable habit. You may drink it to be more awake and alert, because you truly like the taste, or both – but I want you to know that I think some reliable studies and correlations seem to show that coffee is not a bad thing.

We live in the leading coffee consuming nation in the world. Americans drink about 400 million cups of coffee a day, and about 83% of us drink coffee. Most of us drink about 3 cups a day, and we spend over \$1000 a year on coffee. There is good news if you are in that 83% - coffee is good for you. In fact, there is evidence that it may be one of the healthier beverages you can drink. Many people, when asked how much they drink, will admit that they limit themselves to maybe two cups a day, because they believe that more than that is not good for you. For most people, if you drank three, four, or even up to six cups a day - it can be very beneficial.

Now, there is no doubt that coffee, or the caffeine it contains, can act as a stimulant and result in insomnia, tremors, raise heart rate and blood pressure a bit, and worsen reflux and heartburn. And, it certainly increases urination, as we all know when drinking a lot of coffee while driving keeps you alert - but necessitates a stop or two along the way. However, if you drink it for a while, as heavier coffee drinkers know, you will develop some “tolerance” to these effects, and they will not be bothersome. Still, the down side of drinking coffee is not too bad.

There is very good evidence these days, some from valid studies and some from correlational type observations, that coffee is good for you in the long run. It seems to be very good for the liver, decreasing the chance of cirrhosis and cancer of the liver. In fact, it almost seems to be “protective” of the liver. It also has been shown in reported studies to decrease mortality (death). A 2012 article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* studied 400,000 people for fourteen years, and reported that participants who drank between two and six cups a day had their total mortality reduced by 10% for men, and 15% for women – and the more one drank per day (up to 6 cups), the better was the “protective” mechanism. One caveat is that some people

drink coffee but associate some unhealthy behaviors like smoking or drinking alcohol excessively – which can negate the beneficial effects. Caffeine can also help you burn fat and lose weight, but if you load up your cup with a lot of sugar, cream, and syrup flavorings, or eat three donuts with your cup - you can also lessen this effect.

Coffee does not seem to raise the risk of heart attack. Many heart patients are told to drink decaffeinated coffee to prevent the caffeine stimulation that might cause abnormal heart rhythms. But, while caffeine can raise your heart rate, it has not been shown to contribute to abnormal rhythms or heart attacks (*Annals of Internal Medicine*, 2008; *American Heart Journal*, 2009).

Another good benefit is that coffee seems to promote insulin sensitivity, which can serve to prevent the development or lessen the effects of type 2 diabetes (*Archives of Internal Medicine*, 2009). In type 2 Diabetes, your pancreas makes insulin, but your cells are resistant to its sugar lowering effects – thus, high blood sugar. Coffee seems to make your cells more sensitive to the insulin you make, thus lessening your degree of diabetes, or at least possibly allow you to take less medicine. Coffee also contains several compounds that have anti-oxidant properties, which can help to reduce insulin resistance and inflammation in your body, and prevent breakdown of body processes – another way to say “anti-aging.”

Those who drink coffee regularly may find another good effect of this beverage that many of us have concerns about as we get older. Regular coffee drinkers have less chance of developing dementias, including the Alzheimer’s type, and Parkinson’s disease (*Journal of Alzheimer’s*, 2009; *Journal of the AMA*, 2000). These risk reductions are not absolute – and you can find heavy coffee drinkers who do develop the above problems – but the numbers support the above statements, and as we discussed last month – the science of medicine relies on numbers obtained from properly conducted studies and experiments.

So, if you enjoy coffee in the mornings to get going, any time of day as a “pick me up,” or after a good meal – it is very much okay. If you drink it to wake up, or if you truly enjoy the taste of this beverage – just know that the health and wellness benefits seem to outweigh the risks, especially those “urban myths” we grew up with that were not based on science. “Coffee will stunt your growth” is a lot like “you’ll shoot your eye out, kid!” Neither is necessarily true if you know your facts and how to treat each situation.

“If this is coffee, please bring me some tea; but if this is tea, please bring me some coffee.” -- Abraham Lincoln

We really do enjoy hearing from you with any questions, concerns, or ideas for future columns and/or health and wellness related issues for the *Georgia Mountain Laurel*. Please send an email to rabundoctor@gmail.com, or call us at 706-782-3572, and we will be sure to consider your input. This and previous articles can be now be found on the web at www.rabundoctor.com in an archived format. If you use Twitter, then follow us for health tips and wellness advice @rabundoctor. Like and follow our Facebook page at [facebook.com/rabundoctor](https://www.facebook.com/rabundoctor). Until next month, live healthy and be well! As always, I want to address your topics of concern and answer your questions. Please feel free to submit health and wellness related questions or issues to the

following email address: rabundoctor@gmail.com. While I cannot promise each one will be answered individually, I can promise that your anonymity will be respected, and I will use this input to guide the content of future columns. Live healthy and well!