

# 5 things to know about your morning cup of joe

*Coffee may bring health benefits, but not all cups are created equal.*

You probably don't think much about your cup of coffee, aside from the fact that it helps you get moving in the morning. But there's a lot to know about this common brew. A recent review article published July 23, 2020, in *The New England Journal of Medicine* looked at how coffee can affect health, and it outlined some interesting findings.

## 1. Coffee won't harm your heart, and it may even help it.

Research has found that not only is coffee not bad for your heart, it might actually be beneficial. "If women are consuming a moderate amount of coffee—up to five 8-ounce cups a day—they do not have to be concerned that it will increase their risk of heart disease or stroke," says Rob van Dam, the review's first author and an adjunct professor of nutrition at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. "There may even be some benefits, particularly for reducing risk of type 2 diabetes, which is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke."

## 2. It contains lots of healthy plant chemicals as well as vitamins and minerals.

Coffee doesn't look or taste anything like a salad, but it contains some of the same benefits. It's chock-full of biologically active phytochemicals (components of plants that affect their taste, smell, and color). These phytochemicals include chlorogenic acid, lignans, trigonelline, and melanoidins. While these names may not mean a lot to you, researchers say they bring a bevy of benefits, including helping to feed healthy organisms in your gut and improving the way your body processes sugar and fat. Coffee is also thought to help to reduce oxidative



Your morning cup of coffee may have some health benefits and some potential drawbacks.

stress by neutralizing harmful substances called free radicals, which can damage your body's cells. It also contains some important nutrients, including magnesium, potassium, and vitamin B<sub>3</sub> (niacin).

## 3. Filtered coffee is better for you than unfiltered coffee.

Bad news if you love your French press, or if you're a fan of Turkish or Scandinavian boiled coffee: unfiltered brews contain a compound called cafestol that can raise your "bad" LDL cholesterol levels, says van Dam. Cafestol is also found in smaller but still noteworthy amounts in espresso, as well as in coffee made in a moka pot.

In contrast, drip-filtered coffee, instant coffee, and percolator coffee have negligible amounts of the compound. Single serve coffee pods, such as K-cups have not been tested separately, but they contain filters and most likely have levels similar to other drip-filtered coffee. "The evidence for a cholesterol-raising effect of unfiltered coffee is strong and consistent from randomized clinical trials of these types of coffee," says van Dam. Researchers reported that LDL cholesterol levels of people who drank a lot of unfiltered coffee (3 to 6 cups a day)

were about 18 milligrams per deciliter higher than those of people who drank filtered coffee. This in turn raised the risk of major cardiovascular events, such as heart attack or stroke.

"For people consuming unfiltered coffee on a daily basis, I would recommend switching to other types of coffee. If you are consuming multiple cups a day of espresso-based coffees—like Americano or cappuccino—I would recommend reducing consumption or partly switching over to drip-filtered or instant coffee," says van Dam. People who already have high cholesterol or a higher-than-average risk of heart disease should be particularly careful, he says.

## 4. What you add to your coffee affects your health.

While coffee can be a good-for-you option, that changes if you add the wrong things. There's a big difference between a cup of coffee served black and a fancy concoction that contains a liberal pour of sugary syrup or heavy cream, or copious amounts of sugar. "This can turn it into a high-calorie beverage that may contribute to excess weight gain and a higher risk of diabetes, unhealthy cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and high blood pressure," says van Dam.

## 5. Coffee isn't associated with a higher risk of cancer.

Research shows that coffee doesn't appear to raise your risk of developing or dying from cancer, and some studies suggest that coffee drinkers even have a slightly lower risk of certain types of cancer, such as cancer of the liver or the endometrium (the lining of the uterus).

## Understanding the findings

So, what do these findings mean if you aren't a coffee drinker?

If you like coffee, it's fine to keep drinking it, says van Dam. But if you don't like the taste of coffee, there are other options to promote heart health, including eating more nuts, whole grains, and fruits and vegetables, and being more physically active. ♥