

- Heart**How coffee could help you live longer****Drinking two to three cups a day is beneficial to heart health, studies find**

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Over the past decade, Hong Kong has seen the growth of small, specialist coffee shops, big-name cafe chains and coffee bean roasters, thanks to its residents' unquenchable enthusiasm for the drink.



Across Asia, the demand for coffee is predicted to increase for years to come. According to a 2021 report by Hong Kong-based market strategy consultancy Mersol & Luo, Japan leads the way, with coffee sales worth US\$34.45 billion in 2020. The mainland was Asia's second largest coffee market, with US\$14.25 billion in sales, while South Korea was the third largest (US\$12.6 billion).

The report noted that Singapore, Hong Kong and Macau were also excellent markets, enjoying annual growth of more than 5 per cent.

With coffee's rising popularity, it might come as good news that it may protect your heart. Three recent studies found that drinking two to three cups a day was associated with a 10 to 15 per cent lower risk of developing heart disease, heart failure, a heart rhythm problem, or dying for any reason. These trends held true for people with and without cardiovascular disease. "Because coffee can increase the heart rate, some people worry that drinking it could trigger or worsen certain heart issues," says Dr Peter Kistler, professor and head of arrhythmia research at the Alfred Hospital and the Baker Heart Institute in Melbourne, Australia and the study's senior author.

"This is where general medical advice to stop drinking coffee may come from. But our data suggest that daily coffee intake shouldn't be discouraged, but rather included as a part of a healthy diet, for people with and without heart disease. We found coffee drinking had either a neutral effect – meaning that it did no harm – or was associated with benefits to heart health." For the studies, Kistler and his team used data from UK Biobank, a large database with health information from more than half a million people who were followed for at least 10 years. The findings were presented at the American College of Cardiology's 71st Annual Scientific Session earlier this month.

But coffee lovers should not take this as a licence to overindulge, says dietitian Karen Chong from Matilda International Hospital in Hong Kong.

"The findings are certainly useful, but observational studies are different from randomised trials, so more in-depth research might be needed. Until then, I wouldn't promote coffee drinking as a way to protect one's heart; however, I will say that having two or three cups a day is acceptable."

Two to three cups of coffee contain around 200mg of caffeine. Chong says that the US Food and Drug Administration recommends no more than 400mg of caffeine per day – which equates to about four to five cups.

If you drink more than four cups a day, you may want to switch to decaffeinated coffee, which has about 97 per cent less caffeine than the caffeinated variety.

"People who are sensitive to caffeine should avoid coffee and other caffeinated drinks altogether, because the caffeine may cause heart palpitations and leave them feeling jittery and anxious," Chong says.

She adds: "I would not recommend these drinks to children and adolescents, either, because the caffeine may negatively affect their nervous and cardiovascular systems. If you're pregnant or breastfeeding, I suggest drinking no more than one or

two cups a day.”

Chong also says that if you suffer from acid reflux you should switch to decaffeinated coffee, because caffeine stimulates the stomach to produce gastric acid.

Be aware, too, that coffee may affect bone health; some studies have found an association between excess coffee consumption and a higher loss of calcium.

Coffee beans are high in antioxidants and flavonoids – naturally occurring compounds that are said to protect our cells from damage and lower our risk of disease.

The two most common types of coffee bean available are robusta and arabica. Chong says robusta beans have a higher antioxidant content than arabica beans, but contain twice the amount of caffeine.

“And of course, the less processed the beans, the better,” she says. “So freshly ground and brewed coffee is preferable to the instant variety, which is heavily processed.

“Bear in mind, too, that roasting coffee beans for too long or at too high a temperature can damage their antioxidants.”

The healthiest ways to enjoy coffee are plain (black) or with plant-based milk or low-fat cow’s milk. Chong says to skip the cream and sugary syrups, especially if you’re watching your calorie intake.

If you find black coffee too bland, she recommends adding ground cinnamon or nutmeg for extra flavour.