

THE HEALTH BENEFITS OF DRINKING COFFEE

Philippine Daily Inquirer · 7 Feb 2023 · A1 · RAFAEL CASTILLO, M.D.

A patient who drinks up to eight cups of brewed coffee daily asked us if it's bad for his health. Our quick reply was that, even good things, taken in excess is bad.

We drink a cup or two of coffee daily, and its health benefits are well established. It doesn't only sharpen one's focus and boost one's energy levels. Black coffee—not the 3-in-1 version—has potent antioxidant effects which may translate to various health benefits: enhancing brain function in terms of improving focus and concentration, protecting the lining of the blood vessels, lowering risk of liver and other chronic diseases, preventing depression, and many others.

Psychologically, many have become dependent on a cup of coffee on waking up to jumpstart their day on the right foot. However, it must be emphasized that caffeine—whether it's in coffee or beverages (soft drinks, energy drinks, etc.)—should be considered a drug. Being so, that means that within a certain dose range, the effect is generally safe and favorable, but beyond the recommended or allowable range, it can have some side effects on the body, just like all drugs. To some degree, there is also some sort of caffeine dependence, and sudden discontinuation can cause withdrawal symptoms, the most common of which is migraine headache.

Below 400 milligrams

Based on studies and consensus of experts, caffeine ingestion in whatever form is considered safe if total intake is below 400 milligrams a day. For those with cardiovascular problems like high blood pressure, angina (chest pains) and arrhythmia (irregularity in heartbeat), we don't recommend more than 200 mg daily. If they could avoid it, that would be much better, especially since caffeine can also interact with some of the medicines commonly taken by heart patients.

Some religions like the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) do not encourage intake of coffee or caffeine-containing beverages for health reasons, but its modern-day leaders recognize that there can be some compelling reasons to allow caffeine intake in their members. Several years ago, the Adventist Church through its world leaders gave a caffeine ban exemption to one of its prominent members—Dr. Ben Carson, a renowned pediatric neurosurgeon and health advocate.

This was after Dr. Carson, who was an early front-runner then in the Republican race for president, was seen on national television to have almost fallen asleep during interviews, debates and even speeches during the early election season. The church leaders stressed that their exemption should not be abused by Dr. Carson. "This is not free license for Dr. Carson to start chugging Red Bulls or become the new face of 5-hour Energy commercials," said the SDA spokesperson.

Because those taking coffee and other caffeine-containing products tend to become dependent on them, it's not recommended for children; and adolescents should limit their caffeine intake to not more than 100 mg a day. Not infrequently, one may encounter children who go into tantrums if they're not given caffeine-containing soft drinks. Sometimes, they can't eat without them. And it usually starts with just a small sip of these soft drinks. So, it's better not to get them hooked to the caffeine in these soft drinks early on.

More than 400 mg a day of caffeine may already cause significant side effects like sleep disturbances, nervousness, palpitations, restlessness, irritability and muscle tremors. Aggressive behavior has also been reported particularly in bus and other public vehicle drivers gulping down cans after cans of energy drinks to keep them awake during long shifts. This is the reason why we advocate banning 24-hour boundary systems, wherein drivers pay for the use of a taxi or other vehicles for 24 hours.

But just as we're advised to count the calories we take in, we should also count the amount of caffeine we ingest daily

"Children are likely to develop and maintain healthy habits in an environment where these healthy habits are seen and practiced regularly," says Rosario P. Paguntalan, MD, chair of the Department of Pediatrics of the top hospital in the Philippines, Makati Medical Center (MakatiMed).

Take the lead in ingraining these five healthy practices:

Eat better. "Make changes gradually during mealtime," said Paguntalan. "Replace pork and beef with chicken, fish and seafood, and look for recipes that incorporate vegetables into dishes. Plant-based meat substitutes are also available in the market today, and can be used as alternative protein sources." Even little tweaks make a huge difference.

Be active. If you're looking for a reason to start exercising, why not make your family your motivation? "By getting fit, you can live long enough to see your kids' kids," she said. "Even 30 minutes of moderate physical activity a day for five days a week has a positive impact on your physical, mental and emotional well-being."

Limit technology. "Establish a no-gadgets schedule in the family. During mealtimes, keep phones and tablets away from the dinner table," said Paguntalan. "Or spend a few gadget-free hours together listening to each other talk about how your day went. The hours away from tech can help you and your kids encourage bonding. A solid and comfortable parent-child bond contributes to good mental health for all parties concerned."

Get a checkup. Sure, you're on top of your kids' pediatrician and dental appointments—but when was the last time you had an annual physical exam? "Again, make your children your reason for staying healthy," said the doctor. "When you see your family physician regularly for a checkup—and not only when you're feeling 'off' or experiencing symptoms—it's your way of assuring your kids that you'll be around for a long time."

Have a healthy attitude. How you deal with stress, disappointment, success, affection from your spouse and children, and other circumstances in life sets an example for your children to follow. "If they see you behaving consistently towards, say, a bad situation by lashing out in anger or shirking from responsibility, that's what they'll do too," Paguntalan said. "Conversely, if they see you face challenges head-on with a positive, can-do mindset, they'll do the same. Overall good health and well-being can only happen at home when you initiate it, and your kids see the benefits of living this way."