



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## NUTRI-NEWS Q&A

### **A few cups of java could be a good thing**

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I read that coffee provides more anti-oxidants by far than any other food or beverage in the American diet. I stopped drinking coffee because it keeps me up at night. Are the same anti-oxidants available in decaf coffee?

- MM, Hudson For years, experts have been out to indict coffee, blaming it for everything from heart disease to high blood pressure to bladder cancer. I suspect it's because people enjoy it so much. It has to be bad for you, right?

I don't have many serious vices, but I do enjoy a cup or two of coffee in the morning. So I've been pleased to see recent research suggesting that coffee may be more beneficial to us than we once thought.

The study you mentioned was done by Joe Vinson at the University of Scranton. He concluded that coffee is the No. 1 source of anti-oxidants in the U.S. diet, partly because we drink so much of it. (Wine and tea are higher in anti-oxidants by volume.) According to the National Coffee Association, more than half of Americans drink coffee daily, and intake is on the rise.

Recent epidemiological studies suggest that moderate to high intakes of coffee are associated with a reduced risk of breast, ovarian, colon and liver cancer; also Parkinson's disease and Type 2 diabetes. And past worries that coffee may cause heart disease and high cholesterol have been discounted.

Why the conflicting results?

First, the kind of evidence linking coffee to health problems (and health benefits) is prone to misinterpretation. Let's say we find an association between coffee drinking, high cholesterol, and risk of heart attack in Finnish men. People who drink coffee also are more likely to be smokers. There may be a link between coffee drinking and eating cinnamon rolls and staying up all night. The increased risk of heart disease, therefore, may actually be because of smoking, eating cinnamon rolls, and staying up all night. Studies have to be carefully controlled for these other factors. Are you with me?

Second, Finnish coffee may be different from American. European coffee is more likely to be boiled rather than filtered. Boiled or French press coffee contains oils that raise blood cholesterol. Filtered does not.

Third, it's important to distinguish between the effects of caffeine and of coffee. There are other active compounds in coffee which have the anti-oxidant effect. These may be responsible for its apparent health benefits.

To answer your question, decaffeinated coffee does contain similar amounts of polyphenols. If you like tea, black or green tea has less than half the caffeine of brewed coffee and more anti-oxidants; that might be a good choice.

Downsides? In addition to causing insomnia in some, coffee has been tied to mild elevation of blood pressure and stomach irritation. But at doses up to about 300 milligrams per day (about 2½ cups of coffee) caffeine improves mood, alertness, and feelings of well-being.

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