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Thursday, February 02, 2006

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BODY & MIND

Is coffee the new health drink?

Long chastised for its harmful properties, health experts have now done a volte face on coffee and are hailing it as the real cup that cheers. A look at what's raising stocks for the coffee beans...

Express Features Service

We all grew up knowing the potential health pitfalls—some rumored, some real—of too much caffeine. Our parents refused to let us drink coffee, afraid it stunted growth, increased stress and caused hyperactive behavior. And we didn't need a doctor to tell us that our morning cup of joe increased jitters, elevated blood pressure and caused rapid heartbeat. Hospitals used to routinely deny coffee to their patients with heart disease because they were convinced that even decaf would induce rapid heart failure.

But recently, caffeine has been earning some street cred. From helping to decrease the risk of certain cancers to increasing one's ability to focus, it seems the laundry list of health benefits associated with coffee far outweigh the risks. Studies have shown that caffeine decreases the risk of type 2 diabetes and Parkinson's disease, as well as fostering increased energy and improved athletic ability. What's next? Are we going to hear that coffee cures the common cold, improves our sex life and prevents baldness?

Read the fine print

News reports trumpet the fact that coffee provides more antioxidants than any other beverage. But read the fine print and you'll find it's the amount of coffee we drink that raises it to number one on the list. Joe A. Vinson, a chemistry professor at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, studied the levels of antioxidants in more than 100 different foods, including vegetables, fruits, nuts, spices, oils and common beverages. Coffee contributed the most antioxidants, but that's because the average adult drinks just less than two cups of java per day. According to the USDA, red beans, blueberries, red kidney beans, pinto beans, blueberries, cranberries, cooked artichokes and apples are among the foods that contain the highest levels of antioxidants. Surprisingly—or not—coffee isn't on the list!

The wise woman's guide to coffee dos and don'ts

So, what's a girl to do when faced with such a conundrum? Well, remember what your mother told you: It is possible to have too much of a good thing. Coffee might offer several health benefits, but drink too

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much and you'll tip the balance toward the commonly associated negatives. So, what is moderation? Anywhere from two to five cups per day is generally considered a safe yet effective amount.

Follow these guidelines to enjoy your favorite blend of java without worry, and pat yourself on the back for potentially improving your health.

* Avoid Scandinavian boiled coffee and coffee brewed by the plunger pot (Cafetiere) method. Both contain high amounts of diterpenes, which raise cholesterol levels. Instead, choose soluble, drip filter and espresso.

* Almost 80 percent of all decaf coffee is decaffeinated using chemicals that, while approved by the FDA, continue to raise concerns about their impact on health. If decaf is your choice, look for coffees decaffeinated with the Swiss Water process, a natural method that doesn't use chemicals. A complete list of cafes, grocers and brands that use this method are at SwissWater.com.

* If you currently avoid caffeine, don't start drinking regular coffee just for its possible health benefits. The negative effects of caffeine—increased heart rate and blood pressure, nervousness, acid reflux—are worse in people not used to caffeine. Your best bet is to enjoy Swiss Water-process decaf.

* Avoid pouring your kids a cup of joe along with their morning cereal. Caffeine's effects are more pronounced in children, and coffee shouldn't take the place of beverages children really need, such as milk for calcium and vitamin D, and 100 percent fruit juice for vitamin C.

* Be careful about what you put in your coffee. Whole milk, sugar and cream quickly add unnecessary calories. A 16-ounce blended Frappuccino with whipped cream packs about 500 calories, while just using milk in your coffee adds only 10 extra calories.

* Remember that a "cup" of coffee is truly only six ounces. Most commercial coffees are served in at least 12-ounce portions, which is really two servings. Measure your coffee mug to find out how much you're really drinking, then keep your total to no more than 30 ounces per day (the five-cups-per-day max mentioned in most scientific research).

* Keep in mind that plain water is still the beverage of choice. It keeps us hydrated, contains no calories, is taste free (a bonus in this flavor-overloaded world) and is cheap and easily available.

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