

FAST FACTS

Caffeine

There is no such thing as free energy

For many people the morning coffee is a savoured ritual, but is caffeine good for us, and how much is enough?

Caffeine is a xanthine alkaloid, or psychoactive stimulant found in many foods and beverages such as coffee, tea, cocoa, chocolate, soft drinks, and energy drinks. Its effect in our body as a stimulant is to speed up signalling between the brain and body. For some people this gives them the feeling of being more energised and focused, yet for others it can have some unpleasant side-effects making them feeling nervous, anxious, or jittery.

Is caffeine good for us?

Some evidence has shown that a moderate amount of caffeine can have some health benefits such as reduced risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke, insulin resistance and Type 2 Diabetes, Parkinson's disease and other neurodegenerative disorders. Caffeine has also been shown to protect our DNA from damage, and therefore reduce our risk of developing cancer.

However, when it comes to caffeine, it's all about the amount, and over-consumption of caffeine can begin to have negative effects on the body, off-setting any benefit that may be derived from more moderate intake.

Tips for controlling caffeine intake

- Delay consuming all caffeine-containing foods and beverages for at least 1 hour after waking. This reduces the effect of caffeine on the cortisol awakening response, an important physiological regulating system
- Work on reducing your caffeine intake to 1 serve per day maximum. Replace caffeinated foods and beverages with decaffeinated, or naturally caffeine-free options, and don't forget to drink water to offset the dehydrating effects of caffeine
- Avoid soft drinks and energy drinks which not only contain caffeine, but also large amounts of sugar, or artificial sweeteners
- Avoid consuming caffeine-containing foods and beverages after midday to reduce the effects of caffeine on sleep quality



How much caffeine is enough?

There is no one-size-fits-all rule when it comes to caffeine. For some people 1-2 cups of coffee a day seems to have no ill-effects, yet others are more caffeine sensitive and are best to avoid it altogether.

As a neuro-stimulant, caffeine stimulates the excitatory centres of the brain, which sends signals to the adrenal glands to release adrenalin. Physiologically this shifts the body into a sympathetic (Fight, Flight, Freeze) stress response. Whilst occasionally this may not have any specific negative effects, frequent use or over-consumption of caffeine over time can dysregulate adrenal function, elevate cortisol, and interfere with dopamine levels leading to fatigue and nervousness, and increase inflammation in the body.

It is also important to consider "caffeine stacking". 1-2 cups of coffee, a couple of cups of tea, and serving of chocolate can start to add up to a significant amount of caffeine intake each day. If you choose to consume caffeine try to keep to no more than 1 serve per day, and avoid caffeine if you are feeling tired, fatigued, anxious, or nervous.