

Caffeine: Don't let your pick-me-up drag you down

By Natalie McGill

You may feel like you need a cup of coffee to wake you up in the morning or an energy drink to keep you awake during the day. Those beverages have one thing in common to keep you coming back for more: caffeine.

Caffeine is a substance that can be found in drinks such as soda, coffee and tea or in foods such as chocolate. It stimulates your central nervous system, making you more alert and focused. But there is such a thing as too much caffeine, and if you think you need two energy drinks instead of one, it's important to recognize signs of a problem — and the ways you can cut back.

With many adult Americans consuming caffeine regularly, people should be aware of how caffeine affects them, says Steven Meredith, PhD, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine's Behavioral Pharmacology Research Unit.

Meredith says a 12-ounce can of soda usually contains 40 milligrams of caffeine, while a 16-ounce energy drink could contain 160 milligrams or more. Cups of coffee bought

at a coffee house can contain 300 milligrams or more of caffeine, he says. And that's on top of added sweeteners and calories.

Healthy adults can have 400 milligrams or more of caffeine per day, but consuming excessive amounts can lead to health concerns such as heart issues, Meredith says. Other side effects can include elevated blood pressure, dehydration, dizziness and trouble sleeping, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"Certain individuals — especially children, the elderly, people with heart conditions, women who are pregnant and breastfeeding or individuals with anxiety problems or other psychological problems — should avoid excessive consumption or check with their physician before consuming too much caffeine," he says.

While people can have side effects from too much caffeine, they can also have withdrawal symptoms when they don't have their usual amount. The symptoms are the "exact opposite of the direct effects of caffeine," Meredith says.

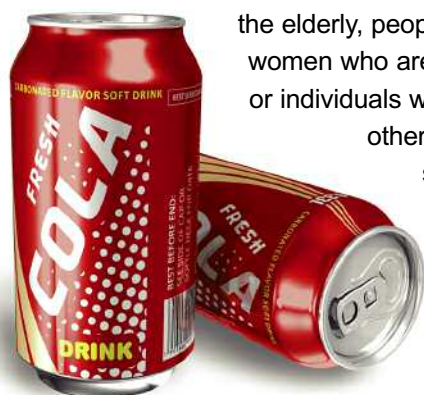
"So if caffeine makes you feel energized and alert, then caffeine withdrawal may make you feel tired or foggy," he says. "And consciously or not, many people try to relieve or avoid the withdrawal symptoms by just consuming more caffeine."

Tips for cutting back on caffeine

If you think you consume too much caffeine and that the best route is stop cold turkey, think again.

Meredith says the best way to reduce your need for caffeine is to wean yourself off of it. If you usually have three caffeine drinks each day, cut back to two, he recommends. Avoid drinking caffeine in the afternoon or the evening, because that could affect your sleep. Regular exercise and a healthy diet can also help you reduce your need for caffeine.

"If you brew your own coffee, or if you buy it from a coffee house, make it 75 percent regular and 25 percent decaf during the first week of your quit attempt, and then slowly kind of mix in more decaf during subsequent weeks," Meredith says.



Many adults who consume caffeine regularly are unaware of the potential negative side effects.

Gradually reducing your need for caffeine is better than bringing your consumption to a grinding halt. Stopping abruptly may worsen withdrawal symptoms such as fatigue, irritability, nausea and vomiting.

Keep caffeine away from kids

While caffeine can be common in drinks aimed at kids, it's best to keep it out of their diets. Pediatricians say that kids younger than 12 shouldn't have caffeine in their diets because there are no benefits to having caffeine at an early age, Meredith says. Consuming caffeine at a young age may lead to slower brain development in teens, a recent study found.

"Children now have access to not only a greater number of caffeine-containing products, but some of these products contain more caffeine than what most of us were exposed to when we were children," Meredith says. "A caffeinated drink might contain three or more times the amount of caffeine that's contained in the serving size of soda."

In addition to knowing how much their children consume, parents should consider either reducing their caffeine intake or cutting it out of their diet to be good role models for their kids.

Instead of relying on caffeine to wake up in the morning or find more energy in the afternoon, "We might want to teach our kids that there are other ways to solve these problems, like exercising or getting more sleep," he says.



>> For more on caffeine, visit www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/caffeine.html

Photos courtesy iStockphoto: Coffee photo by Carlos Alvarez

Recognizing the signs of a habit

If you need more caffeine to feel the same way you used to with a smaller dose, such as needing two cups of coffee to wake you up instead of one, that can be a sign that you're developing a habit. If so, you may experience withdrawal symptoms, such as headaches, when skipping caffeine.

