

Health Benefits of Java

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Wake up and smell the ... antioxidants?

If you think your morning cup of joe provides nothing more to your body than a jolt of caffeine, you might be pleasantly surprised to learn that your daily cup (or three) provides some health benefits as well. According to Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics spokesperson Joan Salge Blake, MS, RDN, LDN, the healthiest perks of coffee include increased cognitive function, possible disease protection and a carrier for milk — adding calcium, a mineral Americans are falling short on.

And those antioxidants? "Coffee provides one of the greatest sources of antioxidants in the American diet, due to the amount of coffee that is consumed," says Academy spokesperson Joy Dubost, PhD, RD. So are the antioxidants responsible for decreased disease risk? Although researchers have yet to determine the exact mechanisms behind some of the disease-preventing effects, Dubost notes it is important to keep in mind that these compounds may be exerting other beneficial effects, such as acting as an anti-inflammatory. Coffee also contains small amounts of some nutrients, including potassium, niacin, vitamin E and magnesium — which helps the body use the hormone insulin.

"I think the beauty of it is that people can go on *enjoying* their coffee," says Salge Blake, who warns that not all coffees are created equal. While an 8-ounce cup of coffee offers some health benefits, coffee shop creations can be surprising high in sugar and fat. Salge Blake warns, "One of these designer coffee drinks can be adding a fair amount of calories to the diet."

A better option? Try a fat-free milk latte, suggests Salge Blake. By ordering a latte, she says, "You can get as much as a cup of milk in your coffee. This is fabulous because most Americans are coming in at about half of the recommended daily servings a day." Making your coffee a vehicle for fat-free milk is one way to ensure your daily calcium and vitamin D needs are met. If your diet does not include dairy, a fortified soy beverage is a calcium-rich alternative.

Dubost also advises spicing up your coffee with cinnamon or vanilla powder. Cinnamon, in particular, is rich in antioxidants and polyphenols, making your coffee even more beneficial.

So how much java is *too* much? Both Dubost and Salge Blake agree that around 3, 8-ounce cups a day is considered moderate coffee consumption. "Caffeine does not cause hypertension," assures Dubost, but warns it has been shown to increase blood pressure for a short duration. Certain groups, such as people with hypertension and the elderly, may be more susceptible to the adverse effects of caffeine. Dubost says pregnant and breast-feeding women will want to limit intake to a *maximum* of 200 to 300 milligrams a day of caffeine (the amount in 2 to 3 cups of coffee). The March of Dimes recommends that pregnant women cap caffeine consumption at 200 milligrams a day.

For those avoiding caffeine, a cup of decaf coffee has about 4 milligrams (as opposed to about 130 milligrams in a cup of regular). "It's still a good carrier for milk," says Salge Blake of decaf.