

Caffeine and Your Health

Having a cup of coffee in the morning is a standard practice for 62% of Americans – and the average coffee drinker consumes more than two cups per day. Enjoying your daily cup of Joe or a diet soda here and there is not an issue in and of itself. However, too much caffeine could cause health problems down the road, or can hide a current health problem depending on your reason for consuming it

If you are part of the 62% of Americans who drink caffeine every day, it is important to evaluate your reasoning for it. Do you simply enjoy the taste? Does it help you feel more awake? Are you not sleeping well? Has your body become dependent on it?

“I think we worry about caffeine consumption because it may be masking underlying problems. Do people need to see their primary care doctor because they have some thyroid abnormalities? Do they have iron deficiency anemia? Are they not sleeping enough? For many people they are going to bed too late, they’re getting up too early, they’re not getting good quality sleep. Potentially they have some sleep apnea. And so there definitely can be many underlying medical conditions that we need to rule out prior to just consuming more caffeine,” explains Dr. Ginny Hendricks, an OSF HealthCare family medicine/sports medicine physician.

Energy drinks, on the other hand, are something that Dr. Hendricks recommends avoiding altogether.

“In general, we don’t really think that any kind of energy drink is necessary. You shouldn’t need an extra boost of energy if you’re sleeping well and you’re eating well and you’re staying physically active. So even these energy drinks that are being marketed as healthy alternatives to other things are probably, at the base, not really healthy,” warns Dr. Hendricks.

According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), caffeine can be part of a healthy diet for most people, but too much caffeine can be dangerous – and depending on individual factors such as weight, medications, and sensitivity, the amount of caffeine that is considered to be too much can vary from person to person.

The FDA reports that a 12-ounce can of a caffeinated soft drink typically contains 30 to 40 milligrams of caffeine, an eight-ounce cup of green or black tea 30 to 50 milligrams of caffeine, and an eight-ounce cup of coffee closer to 80 to 100 milligrams. Caffeine in energy drinks can range from 40 to 250 milligrams per eight fluid ounces. Even decaf coffee typically has two to 15 milligrams in an eight-ounce cup, so it is important to take that into consideration when consuming products labeled as decaf.

So what is the general rule of thumb? Dr. Hendricks advises to always use caution when consuming caffeinated beverages.

“I think limiting yourself to one cup of coffee in the early morning is probably the best option because if you’re drinking caffeine throughout the day – especially in the afternoon and evening – you’re not going to sleep well. Then because you don’t sleep well you’re going to be tired in the morning then have more caffeine throughout the day. It just becomes a cycle,” Dr. Hendricks explains.

If your caffeine consumption is correlated to the amount of sleep you are getting, Dr. Hendricks recommends paying attention to this pattern and seeing your primary care provider if sleep has been a consistent issue for three or more months.

One of the most common mistakes people tend to make when it comes to caffeine is skipping out on drinking water. If you are drinking coffee or another form of caffeine, it is important to continue to drink water in order to avoid dehydration.

“A lot of caffeine is actually a diuretic so we worry that if you are drinking more caffeine and not quite enough water that you’re not actually being well-hydrated because you’re not drinking your recommended 64 ounces of water a day – which is your eight glasses – and also are pushing that water out because of your caffeine consumption. So limit your caffeine consumption – and make sure you are drinking your 64 ounces of water a day,” says Dr. Hendricks.

So when does caffeine consumption become life-threatening?

“We see people who are having side effects from caffeine over-consumption. We see especially young, healthy people having heart palpitations. They will be very anxious or shaky. So I think that if you have tried to cut back on your caffeine but you feel you aren’t able to because of withdrawal symptoms, then you need to see a doctor – or if you are having any chest-related symptoms,” Dr. Hendricks advises.

To find a healthcare provider near you, go to www.osfhealthcare.org. If you are experiencing a medical emergency, call 911 or go to your nearest emergency department.