

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MONICA

REINAGEL:

Hi there, this is Monica Reinagel, and you're listening to the Nutrition Diva, quick and dirty tips for eating well and feeling fabulous. Today's nutrition tip is that, for most people, caffeine probably does more good than harm.

Ever notice that smug look people get when they tell you that they don't do caffeine as if this somehow makes them morally superior? Hey, there's no need to feel guilty about your little coffee habit. In fact, the caffeine addicts of the world may end up having the last laugh. It turns out that caffeine has a lot of positive health benefits and, despite what you may have heard, relatively few drawbacks.

People who drink coffee every day, for example, have a significantly lower risk of diabetes, Parkinson's, colon cancer, gallstones, and Alzheimer's disease. Now, that may not all be due to caffeine. Coffee contains a lot of volatile compounds and antioxidants that may have beneficial effects by themselves or in combination with caffeine.

For example, drinking tea doesn't seem to reduce your risk of diabetes, even though tea contains caffeine. On the other hand, people who drink decaffeinated coffee do have a reduced risk, but decaf only seems to work about half as well as caffeinated coffee. It's definitely the caffeine that protects against Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, though.

Not only does caffeine stimulate the brain and the central nervous system, but it appears to protect it as well. Caffeine doesn't make you any smarter, but it does make you more alert. And it boosts your ability to concentrate, which can make you a better test taker, or a better driver.

Note that caffeine is not an antidote to liquor, however. If you or one of your guests has had too much to drink, having a cup or two of coffee isn't going to make you or them fit to drive. You're far better off skipping the coffee and sleeping it off instead.

And if you wake up the next morning with a headache, caffeine can help you treat it. In fact, the popular headache medicine Excedrin contains as much caffeine as a big cup of coffee. That's one of the reasons it works so well.

Caffeine also enhances athletic performance. In fact, up until recently, caffeine was

considered a performance-enhancing drug by the International Olympic Committee, and athletes had to keep their intake of coffee fairly low to pass their drug screens. Unlike most performance-enhancing drugs, you can safely try this one at home. Have a cup or two of coffee one hour before your next workout, and you might find you're able to go a little bit faster, stronger, and longer.

Many of the negative things you've heard about caffeine are actually myths, several of which I've debunked on previous shows. It's a myth, for example, that caffeine can increase pain, tenderness, or benign lumps in the breast, also called fibrocystic changes. Trial after trial has found no connection.

It's also a myth that caffeine weakens your bones, which I explained in episode number 25 when I talked about nutrition for healthy bones. And as I explained in episode number six, which was on the dehydration myth, caffeinated beverages are not dehydrating. Caffeine is a diuretic, meaning that it makes you pee more, but the fluids in coffee and tea more than replace any fluids that you lose due to the diuretic effect. Keep in mind, though, that caffeine pills don't contain any fluids, and therefore they can be dehydrating.

Finally, you may have heard that caffeine or coffee is bad for your heart. Some recent studies have found that drinking unfiltered coffee, such as the kind you make in a French press or a percolator, elevates cholesterol. Now, it appears to be the volatile oils in the coffee rather than the caffeine that affect cholesterol, and it only seems to affect men. But coffee drinkers are no more likely to develop heart disease. And although caffeinated coffee can temporarily increase your heart rate a bit, it does not cause irregular heartbeat.

There are some legitimate downsides of caffeine, but they're relatively minor. Some people find that too much caffeine makes them jittery, anxious, or disrupts their sleep. How many cups of coffee it takes to make your hair stand on end or how late in the day you can drink a cup of coffee without staring at the ceiling all night subject to a high degree of individual variation.

If you drink coffee or other caffeinated beverages regularly, you're much less likely to experience any negative side effects from caffeine. And that's because caffeine is highly habituating. Some people even say it's addictive, although that seems a little harsh.

The biggest problem with being habituated to caffeine is that you might feel a little sleepy or

headachy if you suddenly swear off. These withdrawal symptoms are harmless, and they last usually only a few days. You can make it easier on yourself by tapering your consumption off over the course of a couple of weeks. But hey, if it's not broken, why fix it?

Now, there are a few people who may want to avoid caffeine. People who are very sensitive to stimulants are usually better avoiding caffeine altogether. In addition, caffeine does appear to negatively affect the growth and the development of babies in the womb, so it's also off limits for pregnant women.

Although caffeine does not cause heart disease, it can temporarily increase your heart rate and your blood pressure. So people who already have heart problems and who are sensitive to caffeine may want to avoid it. Even if there's only a small possibility that a jolt of caffeine will trigger an event, many people feel it's just not worth the risk. For everyone else, moderate consumption of caffeine appears to have a lot of benefits and limited disadvantages.

Now, the alert listener will have noted that I have once again invoked the M word, "moderation." And here are your parameters for moderate caffeine consumption. The benefits of caffeine start kicking in when you consume just a cup of coffee or a couple of cups of black tea every day. The positive effects really start piling up when you drink three or four cups of coffee a day or the equivalent.

And people who drink seven or eight cups a day, they might get even a little bit more benefit, but they also have a higher risk of ill effects. And more than that is really not advisable. To find out how much caffeine is in different types of coffee, tea, chocolate, and soda, see the show notes at nutritiondiva.quickanddirtytips.com. And I'll also include some links to more information on coffee, caffeine, and health.

Visit audiblepodcast.com/diva to pick out your free audiobook download. Choose from over 40,000 titles, including great books about food, nutrition, and health. I highly recommend Michael Pollan's bestselling book *In Defense of Food*, as well as Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*. Your first download is free. Visit audiblepodcast.com/diva for details.

This is Monica Reinagel the Nutrition Diva reminding you that these tips are provided for your information and are not intended as medical advice because everyone is different, so please work with your health professional to determine what's right for you. And now, have a great day, and eat something good for me.