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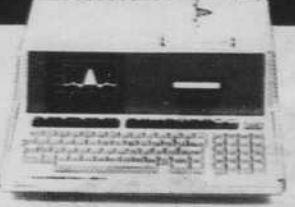
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# Coffee obsesses US

A girl rushed into class late. Looking harried, she settled into a seat, papers falling all over.

"Unless I get my cup of coffee in the morning, I'm worthless," she said, clutching her coffee.

What began in Africa — the story goes — is a daily fixture of the American way of life. From coffee breaks to coffee cake to coffee tables, Americans love the stuff and depend on it for a quick perk-up.

By definition, coffee is a beverage prepared by adding boiling water to the ground, roasted seeds of a tropical evergreen tree of the Coffea family.

Caffeine, coffee's active ingredient, is a drug that stimulates the central nervous system. The drug increases levels of chemical messengers used in the transmission of nerve impulses, according to the book "Coffee and Tea" by Peter Quimpe.

Caffeine has its maximum effect two hours after ingestion. Two cups will do the trick, but more than 70 can kill, Quimpe reports.

The drug "is a blocker of an important enzyme in the body, and it tends to enhance the effectiveness of certain hormones and neuro-transmitters," says adjunct psychology Prof. Martin Lickey.

The general affect is one of arousal, he says. And there is evidence avid coffee chuggers can become addicted if they drink too much and just can't stop.

"Addicts" who give up drinking coffee experience "mild withdrawal symptoms indicated by agitation and uncomfortable feelings," says Lickey, who has taught a class on drugs and behavior.

Recent information on the possible dangerous side effects of drinking too much caffeine has caused some people to think twice about their consumption habits for health reasons.

"I used to drink a lot more coffee than I do now," says Jamie Douglas, manager of Kinoko's, a store that specializes in printing, but sells coffee beans and brewing paraphernalia on the side.

"But now I only drink regular coffee in the morning and then switch to de-caffeinated coffee in the afternoon," she says.

Like other coffee drinkers, she says she reaches her tolerance level and then changes because the desired psychological and physiological effects have been attained.

Some reported nasty side effects of caffeine include irregular heart beat, high blood pressure due to contracting blood vessels, stimulation of the brain's respiration center and increased breathing rate.

And high doses of the drug can cause anxiety, headaches, nervousness and insomnia.

Studies indicate there may be evidence of caffeine having effects on heart damage and heart disease, aggravation of stomach and intestinal ulcers, and possible association with cancer of the kidneys and lower urinary tract.

But research also indicates caffeine helps maintain alertness, increases physical endurance and elevates mood and attitude. A therapeutic treatment currently being investigated to control behavior shows caffeine replacing amphetamines as a drug used with hyperkinetic children.

In short, the history of coffee can be traced from Africa, to Arabia, where the natives first roasted and brewed the beverage — leaving travellers to tell the West about its medicinal properties.

Ultimately the drink spread to Latin America, today's principal coffee producer. Coffee production now ranks among the world's five most important commodities along with sugar, wheat, wool and cotton. The United States imports three billion pounds a year.

"Caffeine is water soluble and there is some lost in the roasting process, because steam is associated with the roasting," Douglas says. Darker roasts represent a longer process with steam which means less caffeine but a stronger flavor, she adds.

The green coffee beans are washed and dried repeatedly, steamed and washed again until they are ready for shipment. They do contain enough caffeine to provide a mild stimulant, but enjoy the label of de-caffeinated.

"Since the flavor of the Swiss Water Process is so good, I get the satisfaction of the taste of the cup of coffee so I don't feel deprived. And yet I'm not getting the negative effects of the caffeine," Douglas says.

The big hit during finals week is the chocolate-covered Espresso Bean, she says. She says it is possible to take a few of them along in your pocket and forget about roasting, water process, cultivation, stimulating myths and Arabian nights when it is necessary to stay awake.

By Tim Leonard  
Photo by David Corey



Coffee beans are weighed by Janet Kopp, manager of Allann Brothers Coffee Co., 2465 Hilyard St.



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