

Caffeine:

What is it ?

A drug is defined as "any compound, synthetic or naturally occurring, that causes a physiological and/or psychological action on a living organism". Caffeine fits this definition and is one of the most widely consumed drugs in this society. Millions of law-abiding American are physically addicted to caffeine - and most of them don't even know it.

A natural plant substance found in coffee beans, cocoa beans, tea and kola nuts, caffeine is consumed for many reason by a wide variety of people in coffee, tea, chocolate or cocoa, and cola drinks. And if not in what people drink, caffeine is present in many foods - baked goods, frozen dairy products, gelatins, puddings, chocolate, and soft candies. It is also an ingredient in more than 1000 over-the-counter drugs--often used in weight control remedies, alertness or stay awake tablets, and headache and pain relief medications.



Caffeine's Effects

Most authorities agree that 200 mg (about 2 cups of coffee) is the amount that begins to cause a wide range of effects on the body. Some people notice these effects in dosages as low as 50 mg. The following systems can be affected: central nervous, cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, and respiratory systems.

Caffeine stimulates the central nervous system within 30-60 minutes of being taken and its effects may last several hours. It can reduce or mask fatigue, improve the ability to think faster and more clearly, and sharpen the senses. Contrary to popular belief, caffeine will not counteract the effects of alcohol.

The gastro-intestinal system can be affected, causing nausea, diarrhea, vomiting and occasionally even peptic ulcers. These effects are probably caused by the irritating oils in coffee, or from an increase in gastric secretions. Caffeine also causes an increase in both heart and pulse rates.

According to the Consumer's Union Report on Licit and Illicit Drugs, physical dependence on coffee (caffeine) may occur when five or more cups are consumed a day over an extended period of time. Psychological dependence, according to the Report, may commonly occur at a lower dosage than five cups a day. However, the exact amount of caffeine which will cause dependence will vary from person to person.

When heavy caffeine users abstain, they experience jitters, nervousness, irritability, and headaches, known as "The Caffeine Headache," 12-18 hours after drinking their last cup of coffee. Heavy coffee users report an inability to work effectively and feelings of restlessness when they give up their morning coffee.

A dosage of one gram of caffeine (about 7-10 cups of coffee a day) can produce insomnia, restlessness, and excitement, which may progress to mind delirium, sensory disturbances such as ringing in the ears or seeing flashing lights, tense or tremulous muscles, convulsions and even hallucinations.

