



Moderate caffeine use not a health hazard

Caffeine, one of the world's most widely used drugs, has stimulated questions about its ultimate safety but "available data do not seem to support a judgment of hazard to mankind from moderate intake," according to the Institute of Food Technologists.

"Caffeine is a natural component of some 63 species of plants, including coffee, tea, cola and cocoa, and is included in many over-the-counter medications," said Jane Wyatt, Oregon State University food science and regional communicator of the institute.

Despite its long history of use, caffeine has come under suspicion in recent years as a health hazard, said Wyatt. Depending on the dose, caffeine can increase the heartbeat and basal metabolic rate, promote secretion of stomach acid and step up the production of urine.

"It acts to dilate some blood vessels, to constrict others, and to increase the capacity for muscular work," said Wyatt. Its overall effect is often described as a lift but a lift only back to an original level of performance—so it is not a true stimulant."

In a report by the IFT Expert Panel on Food Safety and Nutrition, caffeine is described as being distributed throughout all body fluids shortly after foods containing it are ingested. The distribution extends to the reproductive system, and caffeine also is absorbed into the milk of lactating mothers.

"The time required for the body to eliminate half the caffeine which has been introduced is less than three hours in children and smokers, from three to seven hours in non-smoking adults and up to 13 hours for women on the pill. Pregnant women may take from 18 to 20 hours to metabolize half the caffeine ingested, but their metabolism usually returns to normal within a month after delivery.

"There is no persuasive evidence that moderate amounts of caffeine are harmful to the average healthy adult," the IFT panel reported. "Excessive consumption, however (more than 1,000 milligrams a day, the equivalent of about 10 cups of strong brewed coffee) may lead to caffeinism, sometimes referred to as 'coffee nerves,' especially if consumed in a short time."

It would take a considerable quantity of caffeine to cause poisoning, an estimated 100 cups of strong brewed coffee or 200 cans of cola beverage consumed within a half hour, the panel reported. Only eight fatalities from caffeine poisoning have been reported in the English language literature, none of them from food.

The IFT panel also reviewed scientific studies: on caffeine in relation to a variety of bodily ills, including ulcers and heartburn, cardiovascular disease, cancer, fibrocystic breast disease and birth defects.

"In general, the studies showed substantial variation, with little actual solid agreement as to dangers from caffeine to human subjects at levels normally consumed," said Wyatt.

Said Wyatt, "For the bulk of the population, caffeine has had a long history of safe use by humans and scientific studies conducted indicate that mankind will suffer no harm by consuming currently available caffeine-containing beverages in moderation."



Left to right: Bob Seeger, Jane Jackson, RN volunteer, Allen Perry, Emanuel Sistrunk, volunteer cook, and Tyrone Middleton, share some holiday coffee at the Red Cross shelter set up at Jefferson High School. (Photo: Richard J. Brown)

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