

BY THOMAS H. LEE, MD

Good News for Coffee Addicts

WHAT'S THE ENGINE that drives American business? Innovation? Perspiration? Capital? Try coffee. From the shop floor to the boardroom, java – and I don't mean the software – fuels workers and shapes office culture. What's more, a steaming cup of joe may be as good for your health as it is for the bottom line.

Many people take their coffee with a small dose of guilt, worried that it isn't good for the body. That's a hold-over from studies done in the 1950s and 1960s showing that coffee drinkers were prone to pancreatic cancer, heart disease, and other woes. These studies failed to account for cigarette smoking, which once went hand in cup with coffee drinking. Since then, the medical community has done a gradual about-face on the health effects of coffee.

Large, long-term studies show that coffee doesn't promote cancer and may even protect against some types. It's safe for the heart – so safe that the American Heart Association says it's OK for heart attack survivors to have a cup or two a day even as they recover in the coronary care unit. Results from the long-running

Health Professionals Follow-Up and Nurses' Health studies show that drinking coffee cuts the risk of dying early from a heart attack or stroke. Coffee also appears to offer some small protection against Type 2 diabetes, gallstones, and Parkinson's disease.

It's possible that the bean improves productivity, too. A jolt of caffeine wakes up millions of workers in the morning (although this hints at its addictive property). Controlled laboratory experiments indicate that it causes feelings of well-being and increases energy, alertness, and motivation. Functional MRI scans


show that coffee activates parts of the brain involved in short-term memory, the kind that helps focus attention on tasks at hand.

For all that, a word of warning is in order. The average cup of coffee serves up about 100 milligrams of caffeine, and a large specialty coffee can deliver five times that much. If you aren't used to caffeine, it can make you jittery, boost your blood pressure, and dehydrate you. But the biggest health hazard is the extra

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stuff that drinkers add to coffee. Taken black, coffee is a nearly calorie-free beverage brimming with antioxidants and other phytonutrients. Add cream, sugar, whipped cream, and flavorings, and it turns into a fat- and calorie-laden dessert, which can add pounds that offset any possible health benefits. For example, a 16-ounce Mint Mocha Chip Frappuccino with chocolate whipped cream contains 470 calories. Tucked into this beverage are 12 grams of saturated fat – nearly a day's worth – and 58 grams (that's 14 teaspoons) of sugar.

For most people, though, the health and social benefits of coffee outweigh the hazards, and the daily grind keeps American business percolating. 

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