

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Coffee: Good, Bad, or Who Knows”

People are bewildered by confusing so-called medical reports, especially those related to coffee. Americans drink an average of 3.1 cups a day and the average size of a cup is 9 oz. 65% of Americans drink coffee with breakfast; 30% drink it in between meals and 5% drink it with meals other than breakfast. The U.S. spends \$40 billion on coffee each year. According to some estimates, 2.25 billion cups of coffee are consumed worldwide, daily. So, surely we must know by now if coffee is good or bad for us. Right? Well, not exactly. A December 2015 headline reads, "Specific coffee chemicals may ward off type 2 diabetes." Almost 1 in 10 Americans are diabetic, and more than half of American adults drink coffee daily. Another reads, "Moderate coffee drinking may prevent premature death." But, a Mayo Clinic study found that men who drank more than four 8 oz. cups of coffee had a 21% increase in all-cause mortality. One would think that anything that humans consume on such a huge scale deserves thorough research into its health benefits, or lack thereof. But, coffee is a complex cocktail of chemicals, including naturally occurring caffeine. Coffee includes more than 1,000 distinct compounds, including caffeoylquinic acids, chlorogenic acids, diterpenes, feruloylquinic acids, 4-methylimidazole and p-coumaroylquinic acids, to name but a few. Thus, with so many chemicals in coffee, we would expect a wide range of side effects. A new study in the American Heart Association's journal *Circulation* brings together data from a number of longitudinal trials. The investigation utilizes data from 74,890 women in the Nurses' Health Study and 93,054 from the Nurses' Health Study 2, plus 40,557 men from the Health Professionals Follow-up Study. Investigators found that people who drank a moderate amount of coffee (fewer than five cups per day) experienced a lower risk of death from cardiovascular disease, neurological diseases, type 2 diabetes and suicide. However, the authors make it clear that the study was not designed to show a direct causation between coffee drinking and illness, so drawing conclusions at this stage would be premature. And, previous results of similar studies have produced inconsistent results in regard to coffee's effects on various illnesses, so the results of this study cannot be taken as definitive evidence. Still, results seem to show coffee as having a positive role in type 2 diabetes, Parkinson's and some liver diseases. Yet, coffee appears to negatively impact blood pressure and plasma homocysteine, both of which increase heart disease risk. Coffee also raises blood pressure and heart attack risk in young adults.

In the America that I love, the answer to the coffee query is "who knows." So, enjoy your coffee, in moderation, of course.

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