

# Coffee! The Good, the Bad, and the Ayurvedic Perspective.

Via [Dr. John Douillard, DC](#) on Jan 11, 2012

In recent years, we have seen an astonishing amount of research being published touting the health benefits of coffee. The question is: do these studies negate the health risks reported in studies past?

In this article and in the video below, I will dive into this very controversial issue of coffee—when it comes to our health, is coffee a friend, or foe? I will also discuss how different bodies may react to coffee differently based on their constitution, and take a look at coffee through the Ayurvedic lens.

Let's take a look at some of the research on both sides before we can begin to judge for ourselves.

## **The Good**

Recent findings show that if you drink one cup of coffee a day, you can reduce your risk of diabetes by 13% (1), but if you drank twelve cups a day, you could reduce the risk of diabetes by 67% (2). *Twelve cups!*

Six cups of coffee a day had an 18% reduction on prostate cancer and a 40% reduction of aggressive lethal cancer (3).

Four cups of coffee a day could reduce your risk of liver cirrhosis by 84% (4)!

Five cups a day for five weeks began to reverse Alzheimer's damage in the brain by reducing levels of amyloid-beta, both in the blood and the brain (5).

One to four cups reduced the risk of Parkinson's by 47% and five cups a day reduced it by 60% (6). In this study, the greater number of cups of coffee per day, the lower the risk of Parkinson's disease.

And while there are many more studies citing the cardiovascular risks posed by coffee consumption, a recent study showed that women who drank 1-3 cups of coffee a day had a 24% lower risk of dying from cardiovascular disease (7).

High blood pressure—once the holy grail of anti-coffee publicity—is now being questioned. Studies have shown for years that coffee will raise blood pressure(8), but new studies show that while the blood pressure will go up initially, if you continue to drink it daily for 8 weeks, the blood pressure will normalize (9).

## What's the secret ingredient?



If you take the caffeine out of coffee, the benefits cited above remain relatively the same. So, if it isn't the caffeine that is responsible for these benefits, then what is it?

There are about 1000 active constituents in the coffee bean and only a few of them are understood. We do know that the coffee bean, the seed of the fruit, is loaded with antioxidants.

Perhaps the most powerful known antioxidant in the coffee bean is called *chlorogenic acid*, a compound that is most concentrated in the green, unroasted coffee bean but dissipates somewhat in the roasting process. The weakening of this compound in the coffee bean's journey from bean to beverage may be why we need such high amounts of coffee to reap its many benefits. Today, green coffee extracts are available to deliver the benefits of chlorogenic acid without actually having to drink the dark roasted brew.

## The Bad

Most of the negative research on coffee can be linked to its impact on the nervous system. Coffee is a stimulant and increases the release of stress hormones, which are usually reserved for life or death, fight or flight situations (10). The elevation of these hormones is detectable hours after consumption. Interestingly, the release of the same hormones occurs with decaffeinated coffee (11).

DHEA (*dehydroepiandrosterone*) is a steroid hormone that decreases with the consumption of coffee. DHEA is responsible for cellular and tissue repair. It also enhances memory and cognitive function, protects against stress, and supports numerous physiological processes (12).

Coffee consumption (including decaffeinated coffee) releases an addictive neurotransmitter called *dopamine*. Dopamine is a pleasure hormone and when the brain is bathed in dopamine, it never forgets the source. After the coffee rush wears off, the brain starts thinking about its next cup, so that when a coffee drinker drives by a coffee shop, they may be compelled to stop even if they were not previously thinking about coffee. This is the effect of dopamine on the brain—it's the addictive "I've gotta have it" hormone (13).

Dopamine may only be one mechanism for the addictive nature of coffee, however. Withdrawal symptoms such as painful headaches, nausea, vomiting, loose stools, depression, anxiety, and fatigue are common when a coffee drinker tries to stop (14).

*In addition, coffee:*

- Increases gastric reflux and heartburn (27).

## The Ayurvedic Perspective

It seems that most of the negative research on coffee stems from the damaging effects of the increased production of degenerative stress hormones. Because these effects seem to be true for both caffeinated and decaffeinated coffee, it would be logical to assume there must be other stimulating elements in coffee.

*If you are using coffee as a stimulant to get energy, that in itself creates an imbalance. Using a stimulant to create energy you do not naturally have can potentially push you into debt, sometimes referred to as adrenal exhaustion.*

Also, coffee, via its dopamine activation, is a very addictive substance that creates highs and lows in energy. In turn, these highs and lows can affect mood and physiological function.

*It is also recognized in Ayurveda that coffee has an effect on the quality of mind, stimulating it into a "rajasic", or overly active, state. This goes against the volumes of teachings that expound on the health benefits of stilling the mind, as in meditation.*

Our world is already over-stimulated to the point that many of us cannot keep up.

Taking a stimulant on top of that will quite possibly drive us to exhaustion.

## Food or Medicine?

That said, I am a believer that all plants have a purpose and we must try to understand them rather than pass judgment on them. Some plants are meant to be used as a food and are safe to eat regularly, others are more like medicines.

***We also have to consider that the way we process coffee may seriously alter its properties.*** There is a long process from bean to brew, and many factors along the way that can change the effects of the original plant as nature intended it. Until more studies are done on the raw green bean, the research we have to work with is based on the coffee drink, and it's clear from this research that coffee has medicinal properties. But is it safe for regular long-term use?

Sometimes the best way to understand a controversial substance is to look at how it was traditionally used. Before coffee became widely grown in so many parts of the world, it was considered an elite drink. In Europe as early as the mid-1600's, coffee was only used in very small quantities after the large meal in the middle of the day. Being very acidic, coffee may stimulate the digestive process and act as a ***digestif***. There is also research that suggests that coffee may help control after-meal blood sugar spikes. However, even using coffee in this way can have undesirable effects in the long-run:

4. It is extremely dehydrating and can dry out the skin, gut, and respiratory tract.

For these reasons, I wouldn't suggest an espresso with every meal, but ***in moderation and for the right body types, coffee may be supportive for digestion.*** However, that same cup of coffee on an empty stomach in the morning will stimulate the adrenals to make excess energy and stress hormones that may deplete the body's reserves. As I mentioned, the boost one feels from coffee is in fact ***stimulating the body to prepare for an emergency.***

It is possible that coffee has the capacity to create a higher state of health for a short period of time, so as to help the body best cope with the "emergency state" of an illness such as diabetes, Alzheimer's, or Parkinson's, to name a few that I mentioned earlier (see **"The Good"** section, above).

My concern is the long-term effect of stimulating the body in this way. Given the facts, it seems more logical to recognize coffee as a drug or medicine: it boosts dopamine and drives degenerative hormones like cortisol, epinephrine (adrenaline), and norepinephrine, and inhibits calming GABA. These changes may be helpful in an emergency state or illness, but whether you would want your

nervous system affected in this way in the long-term is questionable.

*As for the reported health benefits, I attribute them to*

- Stimulating the body into a medicinal/emergency response to deal with a
  - The wealth of antioxidants present in coffee, which certainly can't be ignored.
- But has the roasting process altered the natural blueprint of coffee's delicate balance of caffeine and antioxidants?

## A Constitutional Approach

Ayurvedically speaking, certain constitutions will tolerate coffee better than others:

- **Vata** types: The hyper-metabolic vata types will be easily over-stimulated by
- **Pitta** Types: The already over-competitive pitta types will be driven even further by the coffee boost. Coffee is also very acidic and heating. This can be too much
- **Kapha** types: The hypo-metabolic kapha types are easygoing and heavy by nature. Coffee may in some instances offer a medicinal boost to stimulate or enhance metabolic function of the body.

\*What's your body type? [Take our easy quiz and find out now.](#)

## Conclusion

Coffee as a drug or medicine may have its place. But how long will the benefits last?

*If you find yourself depending on coffee for boosting energy, mental clarity or keeping your bowels regular, this may be a problem as the benefits may be short-lived.*

Soon, more coffee may be needed to create these "benefits," eventually leading to over-stimulation, adrenal exhaustion, negative side effects and even addiction. And, as with any addiction, it will ultimately leave us and our health at a disadvantage.

The green coffee extracts on the market may show some promise as preventative and healing agents, and I look forward to more studies about their efficacy. If we could harness the amazing benefits of this plant without risking the negative side effects, that would of course be ideal.

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**Dr. John Douillard, DC** has been practicing and teaching Ayurveda since 1988. He is the founder, owner and practitioner at John Douillard's LifeSpa. He regularly lectures worldwide and is a faculty member at the Institute for Integrative Nutrition. To sign up to receive his free, weekly video-newsletters right in your inbox, along with exclusive discounts on Lifespa's organic herbal supplements and skin care products, visit [lifespa.com](http://lifespa.com). John's book, **The 3-Season Diet**, discusses the very simple and profound Ayurvedic principle of eating more foods in their appropriate season. Ready to plan for a spring cleanse? Check out Dr. Douillard's **Colorado Cleanse**, a two week at-home detox plan designed to reset digestion, restore balance, and body/mind well being.