

**From the practitioners of Sutter Center for Integrative
Health**

Naturally Healthy Alternatives to the Caffeine Roller Coaster

By Ron Cotterel, M.D., M.S.

We live in a caffeine-drenched world. Eight out of ten adults in the United States are habitual daily coffee drinkers. And, if you consider other caffeinated products such as sodas, tea, and chocolate, few would argue with the statement that caffeine is the number one stimulant of choice around the globe. And, keeping in mind the withdrawal symptoms such as irritability, drowsiness, nausea, and that dreaded “caffeine headache,” caffeine may be considered the most commonly abused addictive substance around.

Caffeine was originally found and used in natural plant sources such as cacao seeds, matte leaves, kola nuts, tea leaves, and, of course the ubiquitous coffee bean. But, as with many naturally derived substances, it has been isolated into a purified chemical form, and as such can be found not only in soft drinks, but also in numerous non-prescription medications including No-Doz, Excedrin, Anacin, Vanquish, and Bromo-seltzer. Chemically, caffeine is an alkaloid, a chemical family composed of thousands of other naturally found substances, including the notorious family members quinine, nicotine, morphine, codeine, and mescaline.

A cup of coffee contains anywhere from 100 to 150 milligrams (mg) of caffeine, depending upon the brewing method. A cup of black tea contains about half as much, a can of soda about a third as much, and a cup of green tea about one quarter as much as coffee. A bar of milk chocolate has 6 mg, and a cup of decaf coffee still contains about 4 mg.

The health benefits and detriments of caffeine are currently undergoing a hot scientific debate. And, while the jury is still out regarding many of its potential long-term ill effects, it is clear that caffeine may cause at least temporary rises in blood pressure, heart palpitations, and heartburn. The symptoms of premenstrual tension syndrome and fibrocystic breasts may possibly be worsened by caffeine, and it might also hasten calcium loss from bones in menopausal women. Pregnant women should avoid caffeine, particularly at high doses, since it crosses the placenta, and has been shown to increase the incidence of miscarriages, stillbirths, prematurity and low birth-weight deliveries. It has also been shown to elevate blood levels of the amino acid homocysteine, which has been implicated as a risk factor in coronary artery disease, and to increase the excretion of B vitamins, particularly thiamin.

Caffeine’s immediate effects vary from person to person. Some who have used caffeinated products experience a pleasant energy boost, whereas other become jittery, agitated and nervous.

So, what can a “hopeless caffeine addict” do if she or he chooses to break the habit? Well, don’t despair; there IS hope!

Firstly, you can minimize those nasty withdrawal symptoms by gradually easing off on your daily caffeine intake. Depending upon your level of daily intake, you might want to cut your caffeine level in half the first week, and in half again on week two. Some people in my practice have found it useful to go to half-decaf, and then to decaf, then to gradually replace the decaf with another non-caffeinated beverage. The same can be done with tea or soda drinkers. When making the transition, the stress on your body can be mitigated by taking a vitamin B complex supplement, and by the temporary use of an herb helpful in adapting to life’s stresses (an adaptogen) such as Panax ginseng.

Secondly, if you need to exchange one habit for another, replace your unhealthy habit with a healthy one. For those who like the warm comfortable taste of a “cuppa Joe”, but not the buzz, there are a number of rich flavored caffeine-free alternatives to coffee available at the your local Food Co-op or health food store. Most of these are based upon combinations of the natural ingredients roasted rye, barley, and chicory (a medicinal bitter herb that improves digestion). Or, if you would like to continue including caffeine in your life, but on a milder and gentler basis, green tea is an option.

The leaf of the tea plant, *Camellia sinensis*, has been used for thousands of years in the Orient for its taste, health properties, and as a gentle stimulant. When the fresh cut leaf is lightly steamed and dried, green tea is produced. Further oxidative processing (which lessens many of the health benefits) produces black tea. A cup of green tea contains not only about 30-35 mg of caffeine, but also about 100 mg of polyphenols, naturally occurring potent antioxidants thought to be responsible for green tea’s usefulness in cancer prevention.

Another way to add warm cups of something healthy to your life is through caffeine-free herbal teas. You may be surprised at the selection of individual and combination herbal teas that are available. You could drink a different herbal tea each week for the rest of your life!

Just as each person is a unique individual, every herb and herbal infusion (tea) has its own set of properties. Some should be reserved for specific conditions or desired effects, but many can be used regularly for “pleasure drinking” with the fringe benefit of natural earth healing goodness. A few examples are chamomile (relaxes the nerves, settles the stomach), peppermint (helps with flatulence and intestinal problems), raspberry (rich in vitamins and minerals, and can help tone the uterine muscles during pregnancy), rosehips (high in vitamin C, and good for colds and general health), and licorice (sweet and soothing to the nose, mouth, and gut).

So, if you decide to jump off of the caffeine train, consider a natural approach to ease the bumpy landing and to making that next ride gentler and healthier.

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