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Coffee & Health

As I sit at my desk with a fresh cup of coffee (not my first...probably not my last) I realize that I may be a little biased when writing on this topic. However, I know that it is often hard to sort the fact from the fiction when the popular press gets hold of the latest scientific findings. With all of this in mind, I'm going to do my best to present to you—objectively—some of the current ideas regarding possible risks and benefits of drinking coffee.

Recent research has found that there are many possible benefits of regular coffee consumption. Coffee, like tea, is a good source of antioxidants—a major reason for many of its positive effects in the body. These antioxidants have been shown to decrease the risk for colon and liver cancers and improve blood sugar metabolism. In addition, a recent Harvard study found that coffee drinkers were less likely to die prematurely, in part due to fewer cardiovascular related deaths. Coffee's antioxidants, which can reduce inflammation, likely played a strong role.

Coffee consumption has also demonstrated positive effects in some lesser known diseases like gout, gallstones, and kidney stones. These protective effects may be due, in part, to coffee's caffeine content. In addition, some research suggests coffee may even be a boost for your brain! This research has demonstrated a greatly reduced risk for developing Parkinson's disease, and a possible reduction in age-related cognitive decline.

Now for the bad news. While not all studies are in agreement, some suggest that coffee consumption can aggravate certain conditions. Migraines, arrhythmias, sleep disturbance, and benign breast disease may be negatively affected. However, these are all caffeine-related, so decaffeinated coffee would likely prevent these issues. Unfortunately, gastro-esophageal reflux disease (GERD) can be aggravated by the decaf version as well—so this problem in particular is not likely to be caffeine-related.

While many of these reports are positive, experts caution that more research is necessary before drinking coffee can be recommended to improve health. However, at the very least this research can reassure current coffee drinkers that they are probably not doing themselves any harm, and may actually see some benefits from their coffee consumption.

When purchasing coffee please keep in mind that the 'Fair Trade' certification ensures the growers are given a fair price and sets forth guidelines for the environmental sustainability of the coffee production. *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*