



Caffeine

For many people one of life's pleasures is picking up a coffee on the way to work, a Coke or similar soft drink with lunch, or an afternoon cup of tea. Although no one will deny the importance and enjoyment of such rituals, it is worth noting that a common ingredient in all of these activities is caffeine, and caffeine is a drug. Caffeine stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, which is what provides the 'pick me up' quality one experiences. Like many substances, use in moderation can be benign or even enhance functioning, however when used to excess it can lead to problems.

Because it is a stimulant, too much caffeine can lead to irritability, anxiety or disrupted sleep. It can also aggravate tension headache, irritable bowel syndrome, heartburn, gastric reflux, chronic pain, and other physical problems.

Heavy users can also become psychologically dependent on it, develop tolerance (meaning that more caffeine is needed to get the same effects), and undergo withdrawal if they don't get it. Withdrawal symptoms include headache, drowsiness, irritability, and difficulty concentrating. Many people discover that they are dependent on caffeine when they go for a day or two without coffee and develop splitting headaches. However, all the symptoms of withdrawal disappear after four days and many people feel rejuvenated with a sense of energy.

How much caffeine does it take to become dependent? Estimates vary, but 450 milligrams per day is about average. Some people are more sensitive, others less. The average five-ounce cup of coffee has about 130 milligrams of caffeine, a shot of espresso 90, a cola 45 and a cup of tea 35 (steeped for three minutes). Like many enjoyable activities, moderation is the key. Be intentional in your choices.

If you decide to try reducing your caffeine intake, do so slowly to avoid symptoms of withdrawal. Drop your intake by about half for 4-6 days, then half of the remainder, then half again until you are drinking no more than 2 cups per day.