Coffee Lovers Perk Up Over More Good News

Science suddenly seems to have a java Jones. Four new studies focus on America's favorite morning brew, adding to the overflowing cup of research linking coffee consumption to health benefits.

Three of the studies examine, at least in part, the possibility that coffee might help protect against diabetes—an idea backed by several previous reports. The E3N/Epic Cohort Study adds support to such a benefit, but finds that when you drink coffee makes a difference: In an analysis of data on 69,532 French women, ages 41 to 72, over an average 11 years, Françoise Clavel-Chapelon, PhD, of INSERM and colleagues concluded that those drinking three or more cups of coffee daily were 27% less at risk for type-2 diabetes. But the association was limited to coffee consumed at lunchtime, leading researchers to speculate that "the time of drinking coffee plays a distinct role in glucose metabolism."

A new clinical trial, however, finds no impact on glucose metabolism but does support a beneficial effect of coffee on cholesterol levels and inflammation.

Kerstin Kempf, PhD, from the German Diabetes Center in Düsseldorf and colleagues had 47 coffee drinkers kick the habit for a month, then ramp back up to four cups daily the next month and eight cups the third month. As the subjects increased coffee intake, HDL ("good") cholesterol increased and subclinical inflammation—a risk factor for diabetes—improved, but there was no change in how the body handles sugar.

Then there's the Strong Heart Study of 1,141 American Indian men and women, ages 45-74. In this population particularly at risk for diabetes, those drinking the most coffee—a whopping 12 or more cups daily—were 67% less likely to develop the disease than non-coffee consumers over an average 7.6 years. Overall, a high level of coffee consumption was associated with a reduced risk of deterioration of glucose metabolism—a precursor of diabetes.

If all this tempts you to plug in the coffee pot, take heart—literally. Research presented at a recent American Heart Association conference reports that coffee drinking isn't associated with a greater risk of heart arrhythmia. In fact, contrary to popular belief, researchers say people who drink four or more cups of coffee daily were actually 18% less likely to be admitted to the hospital for a heart-rhythm disturbance than coffee abstainers. Arthur Klatsky, MD, of Kaiser Permanente and colleagues confess to being surprised by their results, because patients sometimes report forceful heartbeats or palpitations after drinking coffee.

If you have trouble tolerating caffeine or coffee, the scientists add, their study shouldn't change the advice to avoid both, nor should you take up the habit in hopes of preventing arrhythmias. But moderate coffee drinkers should take comfort in the results. Sorry, tea lovers, the seven-year study of 130,034 men and women found no similar benefit for tea drinking.


Exercise Works to Protect Bones; Black Cohosh Doesn't

Postmenopausal women can protect their bones by exercising, but adding black cohosh—an herbal supplement thought to have estrogen-like effects—to exercise confers no extra protection. That's the conclusion of a year-long clinical trial involving 128 women who recently went through menopause.

Michael Bebenek of the University of Erlangen and colleagues randomly assigned 86 women to a vigorous exercise program that interspersed six weeks of high-impact aerobics and strength training with 10-week intervals of more moderate activity such as brisk walking and step aerobics. The rest of the women joined a "wellness" group that performed only less-strenuous activities including light walking and balancing and stretching exercise for one hour a week; this 10-week regimen alternated with 10 weeks of no exercise at all.

Half of the exercise group also received daily 40-milligram doses of black cohosh (Cimicifuga racemosa), an herb touted as a "natural" form of hormone replacement therapy. Black cohosh has been promoted for relief of hot flashes and other menopause symptoms. Last year, an evidence review found mixed results in seven trials of black cohosh for menopause symptoms, but warned that women using it should be aware of the potential risk of liver toxicity. Bebenek and colleagues stated that they believe theirs is the first clinical trial to test black cohosh for benefits on bone density.

After a year, women in the exercise group showed no significant decline in bone density at the spine and a slight increase in bone mass at the hip; those in the black cohosh subgroup saw no added benefit from the herb. Women in the wellness group, by comparison, saw declines in both measures of bone density.

Researchers also measured changes in the women's estimated risk of suffering a heart attack or dying of heart disease.

"Our exercise program favorably affected bone, menopausal symptoms, lean body mass, and, to a smaller extent, 10-year coronary heart disease risk in early post-menopausal women," Bebenek and colleagues concluded.

Supplementation with black cohosh, they added, did not enhance these benefits.

TO LEARN MORE: Menopause, online before print; abstract at <dx.doi.org/10.1097/gme.0b013e3181cc4a0d>.

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