The Pros And Cons Of Coffee And Tea

The risks and benefits of coffee, tea and caffeine consumption are even more controversial and confusing than calcium. The public has repeatedly been warned and most people believe that too much coffee and caffeine can cause cardiovascular problems like hypertension, rhythm disturbances and heart attacks. Pregnant women are told to limit coffee since it has been associated with low birth weight.

However, most studies suggest that drinking up to 5 cups of coffee daily does not pose any health hazards and some suggest surprising benefits. One from the U.K. found that the more coffee subjects drank, up to about five cups a day, the higher their average scores on various tests of cognition, including a memory quiz that involved recalling items from a list of foods. Elderly subjects seemed to benefit the most. Those who drank four to six cups a day had scores about 8 percent higher than decaffeinated coffee controls.

Other studies show that regular coffee drinking reduces risk for gallstones and Parkinson's disease. It is not clear whether these effects are due to caffeine concentrations, which can vary considerably depending on source and preparation. Dark-roasted beans contain more caffeine than light-roasted varieties and caffeine in an eight-ounce cup of regular coffee can range from 150 to 263 mg. depending on whether it is percolated or drip, compared to 76 to 110 mg. for instant coffee and 30 to 50 mg. for a demi-tasse of espresso.

While coffee and caffeine are often perceived as potentially harmful, tea, which also contains caffeine, is promoted as providing varied health benefits. Starbucks patrons and other coffee drinkers are often surprised to learn that next to water, tea is actually the most consumed beverage in the U.S. Most people drink coffee because of its stimulating effects but tea seems to offer something for everybody. As William Gladstone, Queen Victoria's Prime Minister wrote: "If you are cold, tea will warm you; If you are too heated, it will cool you; If you are depressed, it will cheer you; If you are excited, it will calm you."

Although tea contains more caffeine/oz. than coffee when in its dry form, it has only 1/2 to 1/3 as much compared to brewed coffee in the same size cup depending on the type of tea (black, green or oolong) and duration and manner of brewing. All teas come from the same Camellia sinensis plant but black tea has the most caffeine and green tea the least. Herbal teas or infusions like chamomile and peppermint are made from other botanicals that do not contain any caffeine.

Over 90 percent of all tea consumed in the U.S. is black tea but green tea, which is a staple in the Orient, is gaining ground. It has long been used in Chinese medicine to treat headache, general body aches, poor digestion, depression, and to increase longevity. It is being promoted here because of studies linking green tea drinking with reduced risk of cancer and heart attacks and claims that in addition to protective antioxidants it contains chemicals with anti-inflammatory effects that could benefit patients with arthritis and colitis, prevent brain damage following stroke and even promote weight loss.

One study of 680 men and women who drank one or more cups of tea a day reported a 44% reduction in heart attacks compared to non tea drinkers. Another in 800 male senior citizens showed a 58% reduction in heart attacks in those who consumed over three cups of tea daily. In contrast, a seven-year study of 11,000 Scotch men and women aged 40-59 found that coffee drinkers were less likely to suffer heart disease than tea drinkers. The greater the amount of coffee consumed (up to 21 cups/day) the lower the chances of coronary disease or death. Surprisingly, the results for tea drinkers, which topped out at 36 cups/day, proved to be just the opposite.

The latest salvos in this debate were a September 4 news release stating that drinking one cup of coffee could increase arterial stiffness for at least two hours and increase risk for stroke. The very next day, another report claimed that coffee had a higher content of the antioxidants that prevent strokes and heart attacks than tea. What should you conclude?