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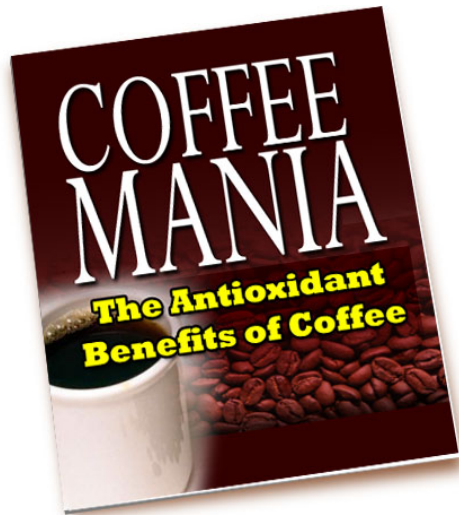
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## Coffee Mania: The Antioxidant Benefits of Coffee



Guilty pleasure, anyone?

For years, caffeine in coffee has been known to have an addictive effect not unlike that which heroin addicts experience. And to think that that is only one of the many reasons why people say coffee is bad for your health.

However, with new studies cropping up concerning the antioxidant benefits of coffee, it seems that this popular beverage has finally joined the ranks of red wine and chocolate as a guilty pleasure that may actually be good for you.

*Coffee is good for you.*

Say what?

Right. This is certainly a jolt-maker, whether you are a java drinker or a latte-monger. Apparently, not only is coffee a great way to get that "fix" in the morning, but a cup or two can actually be healthy.

**Studies Show: Drink Your Antioxidants**

Whenever someone mentions antioxidants, the first thing that comes to mind are huge capsules mega-loaded with vitamins like C, E, and A. In fact, antioxidants can be found in common everyday beverages we take in without even knowing they're rich antioxidant sources.

The three common beverages the average American consumes on a daily basis include tea, cocoa, and coffee, and there's every reason to assume, with what the English termed as the "coffee phenomenon" in the U.S., that coffee is the most widely consumed of the three.

Research has shown that oxidation of cholesterol-rich low-density lipoproteins (LDLs) – the so-called ***lipoproteins*** – contributes to their transformation into fatty plaque. This would then lead to the development of artery clogging plaque, resulting to many degenerative diseases, not least of which is heart disease and high blood pressure.

In order to test the potential benefits of dietary antioxidants, scientists measured their ability to protect LDLs from oxidation. Using this method, previous studies showed that dark chocolate triggers a number of beneficial changes that would appear to slow the ravages of atherosclerosis. In another host of studies, scientists demonstrated that tea contains potent antioxidant flavonoids and that the quantity regularly consumed in tea tends to correlate with hearth health.

So where does coffee place in all this?

### ***Better than Tea***

In a study, entitled *Comparison of the Antioxidant Activity of Commonly Consumed Polyphenolic Beverages (coffee, cocoa, and tea) Prepared Per Cup Serving* published at the July *Agricultural and Food Chemistry*, Nestle's Myriam Richelle and her colleagues had a grand time brewing strong cups of coffee and tea and mixing cocoa powder into hot water to make hot chocolate. Their goal was to find out how coffee and tea stacked up against conventional antioxidant sources.

After mixing the drinks, the scientists collected blood from healthy volunteers and filtered out the plasma containing LDL particles. In each run, a sample of these LDLs was incubated with a small quantity of beverage. Afterwards, a known antioxidant was added to the mix.

Now comes the comparison.

Compared to LDLs treated with the antioxidant alone, those mixed with a beverage experienced less oxidation. The protection afforded by each beverage was indicated by the time it took the LDLs to oxidize – the longer the lag time, the better the protection.

In this experimental setup, coffee protected LDLs for 5.0 to 16.0 hours. By contrast, cocoa protected the lipoproteins for 3.5 to 7.5 hours, green tea for 3.0 to 5.5 hours, black tea for 1.0 to 4.5 hours, and herbal tea for 6 minutes to perhaps an hour.

The range of times for each beverage reflects the varying strengths of the batches prepared. Because there is considerable variation between countries in the way each typically prepares a particular drink, these scientists formulated each beverage in various strengths – and observed a marked dose-dependence in their effects.

The more concentrated the brew or cocoa, the better protection it afforded.

### ***Milk Added?***

Granted that these beverages do have antioxidant effects on LDL, what happens if you add milk?

Richelle's group had the same concern. They surmised that it was possible that milk might bind to the antioxidant compounds in one or more of these beverages. So in order to find out whether or not the addition of dairy would compromise a drink's antioxidant potency, they conducted a separate experiment.

The scientists mixed in enough milk to equal 10 percent of the volume for the brews and a full 66 percent of the volume for cocoa. To their surprise, they found no change in any of the drinks' LDL protection.

The same thing applies with decaf. Richelle's group found that even caffeine-free coffee offered the same LDL protection.

### **Coffee vs. Conventional Antioxidant Sources**

In a new study on U.S. diet conducted by researchers at the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, coffee has been found to be rich not only in antioxidants but in hundreds of pain-relieving and anti-bacterial compounds as well.

Antioxidant wise, coffee has beaten out black tea, bananas, dry beans, and corn – all common sources of antioxidants – to shoot right up to the top as the number one antioxidant source.

“Americans get more of their antioxidants from coffee than any other dietary source. Nothing else comes close,” says study leader Joe Vinson, Ph.D.

Although fruits and vegetables are generally promoted as good sources of antioxidants, the new finding is surprising because it represents the first time that coffee has been shown to be the primary source from which most Americans get their antioxidants. Both caffeinated and decaf versions appear to provide the same levels of antioxidants.

Based on comparisons of the concentration of antioxidants in coffee and the relative amounts we consume of coffee and the more conventionally acknowledged antioxidant sources – fruits and vegetables – the study found that coffee contributes more to our antioxidant intake than any other food.

### **Which Types of Coffee?**

So coffee is rich in antioxidants. But there are several different types of coffee that man drinks. Which one contains the highest antioxidant level?

The Department of Pharmaceutical Chemistry at the University of Pavia in Pavia, Italy studied the antioxidants present in the green and dark roasted coffees Coffee Arabica and Coffee robusta. Not surprisingly, they found that all of the studied coffees showed a strong presence of them and also anti-radical activity.

However, their findings showed that there was no marked difference between the green and dark roasted coffee. This indicated that the roasting process did not damage the natural antioxidant presence in the coffee beans.

In another study, the School of Food Bio Sciences at the University of Reading, Whiteknights in Reading, United Kingdom looked at the effects of roasting coffee, with the goal of finding out the negative effects on antioxidant presence.

The scientists studied the Colombian Arabica coffee that was roasted to light, medium, and dark roast. They found that medium roasted coffee had the maximum detoxification activity. This is

substantially different from the widely accepted assumption that dark roasted coffee had more antioxidant benefits.

It appears, according to this study, that medium roasted coffee has a more powerful antioxidant effect than the dark roasted one.

### **Antioxidant Activity of Coffee**

Antioxidants are specialized chemicals that neutralize harmful molecules, called free radicals, found in the body. The University of Scranton chemistry professor, Joe Vinson, explained that when too many free radicals build up in the body, they start to damage cells. This damage will eventually lead to the development of cancer and heart disease.

Numerous studies in recent years have touted the benefits of eating foods high in antioxidants to ward off such diseases. And coffee is only one rich source of antioxidants.

“Antioxidants are compounds already in your body, but you need more than what the body produces,” Vinson said.

In his study which aimed to measure the antioxidant capacity of coffee, Vinson’s team analyzed the amount of antioxidants in a variety of foods and compared those figures to how much of each food type, on average, people in the U.S. consume.

The scientists found that the average person guzzles down more than a thousand milligrams of antioxidants a day from coffee. This rate far surpasses the next runner-up, black tea, which accounts for a few hundred milligram a day on average.

The beverage also easily outranked such popular antioxidant sources as tea, milk, chocolate, and cranberries. Of all the foods and beverages studied, dates actually have the most antioxidants of all based solely on serving size. But since dates are not consumed at anywhere near the level of coffee, the blue ribbon goes to the favorite pick-me-up as the number one source of antioxidants.

The antioxidants in coffee are known as polyphenols. Sometimes they are bound to a sugar molecule, which covers up the antioxidant group, Vinson said.

The first step in measuring them was to break that sugar link. Vinson noted that chemicals in the stomach do the same thing, freeing polyphenols.

“We think that antioxidants can be good for you in a number of ways,” Vinson said, further adding that the effects may even include affecting enzymes and genes, although more research is needed to prove that.

Besides keeping you alert and awake, coffee has also been linked to an increasing number of potential health benefits, including protection against liver and colon cancer, type 2 diabetes, and Parkinson’s disease, according to some recently published studies. But while the findings would seem to encourage people to go out and drink more coffee, Vinson emphasizes moderation.

“If I say more coffee is better, then I would have to tell you to spread it out to keep the levels of antioxidants up,” Vinson said. “We always talk about moderation in anything.”

### **How Much is Enough?**

“One to two cups a day appear to be beneficial,” Vinson says about coffee.

If you don’t like coffee, consider drinking black tea, which is the second most consumed antioxidant source in the U.S. diet.

Dr. Keith I. Block of the Block Center for Integrative Cancer Care and Optimal Health in Evanston, Illinois is in agreement. He concedes that while coffee might be the number one source of antioxidant in the American diet, “that is not license to make it a mainstay of your health regimen.”

Block further noted that “Vinson’s (Dr. Joe Vinson, the lead scientist who conducted the University of Scranton study) results are perhaps more a reflection on the inadequacy of our fruit and vegetable intake than on the health benefits of coffee, which has some significant health concerns for many people.”

Vinson says, “There are about 4,000 known (antioxidant) compounds that are in plants. Their purpose (for the plant) is to reduce free radicals from UV light (exposure). Coffee is a rather unique plant in that it doesn’t have a lot of different chemicals in it.”

Other study authors and experts warn that people get the most disease protection when they consume a wide variety of antioxidants. Since coffee carries only a few specific types, it is not recommended that you make the bean your only antioxidant source.

Director of the Antioxidants Research Laboratory at Tufts University's Jean Mayer USDA Human Nutrition Research Center on Aging in Boston, Massachusetts, Jeffery B. Blumberg also cautions that Vinson's study data do not account for how well chemicals in coffee are absorbed in the body.

"The antioxidants in coffee are primarily of a specific type...", he said. "We know relatively little about its activity in humans and its biological role."

"To suggest its role is similar to other essential antioxidants is misleading," he added.

Both Vinson and Blumberg recommend that eating more foods that contain a host of vital minerals and nutrients in addition to a high concentration of antioxidants – such as vegetables, fruits, nuts, and whole grains is better than relying solely on coffee.

### **Coffee and Other Diseases**

In February, a team of Japanese researchers reported in the *Journal of the National Cancer Institute* that people who drank coffee daily, or nearly every day, had half the liver cancer risk of those who never drank it. The protective effect occurred in people who drank one to two cups a day and increased at three to four cups.

Last year, researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health also found that drinking coffee cut the risk of developing the most common form of diabetes.

Men who drank more than six 8-ounce cups of caffeinated coffee per day lowered their risk of type 2 diabetes by about half, and women reduced their risk by nearly 30 percent. All that when compared with people who did not drink coffee, according to the study in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

Still, the rule is moderation.

Bonnie Liebman, nutrition director of the Center for Science in the Public Interest said that while many people have faith that antioxidants will reduce the risk of cancer, heart disease and more, the evidence has not always panned out.

Most experts are looking beyond antioxidants. More specifically, they are looking at the combination of vitamins, minerals, and other nutrition in specific foods.

Vinson had the same idea.

“Unfortunately, consumers are still not eating enough fruits and vegetables, which are better for you from an overall nutritional point of view due to their higher content of vitamins, minerals, and fibers,” Vinson said.

Coffee should not be a substitute for healthier foods such as fruits and vegetables that offer many more nutrients than coffee. In addition, researchers say that high levels of antioxidants in foods don’t necessarily match the levels found in the body. In fact, many agree that more needs to be understood about how these antioxidants are absorbed and used by the body.

But in the meantime, if you want the full effects of varied antioxidant sources, don’t forget to eat your greens and the proverbial apple.

After coffee, here are the next top 10 sources of antioxidants in the American diet, according to Vinson’s study:

- Black tea
- Bananas
- Dried beans
- Corn
- Red wine
- Beer (lager style)
- Apples
- Tomatoes
- Potatoes

“The idea is to get a variety of antioxidants. With just coffee you are not getting all the kinds there are,” Vinson said.

## **In Conclusion**

Various research studies have pointed out the health benefits of coffee, but this should not be reason enough for you to increase your uptake of the beverage. You should remember that coffee may also have some negative effects on your health.

For instance, coffee is high in caffeine, a substance that can cause anxiety, headaches, and can contribute to health problems, such as high blood pressure and rapid heart rate.

So what does this mean for you, oh-coffee-drinker-I-can't-live-without-my-caffeine-fix? Certainly, not that you should go out to the nearest coffee shop and drink with wild abandon. But it is rather comforting to know that that cup or two you drank this morning has some beneficial effects on you.

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