

## Information Sheet - Institute of Welfare

### Caffeine – The Bigger Picture

Caffeine is a drug that is found in tea, coffee, cocoa, many soft drinks such as colas and some chocolates. It is also used in a wide variety of medicines especially cold remedies.

On average in the UK, we drink nearly 123 million cups of tea per day, each cup containing about 40mg of caffeine, but more if the tea is left to brew longer. Coffee is almost as popular with 90 million cups of coffee consumed a day. About 70 per cent of this is instant coffee containing around 60mg of caffeine per cup.

#### **Effects/Risks**

Caffeine is an 'upper' and helps stimulate the body, increasing heart rate and blood pressure. It combats tiredness and drowsiness and makes people feel more alert and able to concentrate. Many people have a cup of tea or coffee every morning to 'get going'. However, people also drink tea and coffee to help them relax. Caffeine also makes people urinate more. High doses can result in people having headaches and feeling very irritable.

People who drink more than 6 to 8 cups of normal strength tea or coffee a day usually become dependent. They may find it difficult to stop using and experience withdrawal symptoms if they try. This can include feeling tired and anxious and suffering headaches.

**"I don't know if I could do without coffee. That first cup in the morning gets me up. Off to work and the first thing is coffee. Basically I drink at least 8 cups a day and the stronger the better. If you said to me don't drink coffee tomorrow I would get very anxious about trying to do it. I don't think I would last very long without it."**

Research into the health effects of long term use of caffeine is inconclusive. However, some reports have suggested that it can lead to a higher incidence of asthma, peptic ulcers, kidney, bladder and heart disease and blood pressure problems.

**We have seen several well-marked cases of coffee excess.... The sufferer is tremulous, and loses his self-command; he is subject to fits of agitation and depression; he loses colour and has a haggard appearance. The appetite falls off, and symptoms of gastric catarrh may be manifested. The heart also suffers; it palpitates, or it intermits. As with other such agents, a renewed dose of the poison gives temporary relief, but at the cost of future misery'. Sir T.C. Allbutt and H.D. Rolleston A system of medicine 1909.**

There have also been concerns about the amount of caffeine consumed by young children particularly in soft drinks and chocolate. Some commentators have suggested that children who consume a lot of caffeine may become hyperactive. A child drinking one can of cola will be taking the equivalent caffeine intake as an adult drinking four cups of coffee.

### **Caffeine - putting advice into action**

Reducing the amount of caffeine you consume can be a difficult task, it is therefore recommended that you do this gradually and adopt the following advice which will help you:

- if you cut out caffeine from your diet entirely, you may suffer from withdrawal headaches. These may develop after about 18 hours. Drink plenty of plain water and eat high-fibre biscuits or a slice of fruity malt cake to help regulate your blood sugar levels.
- these headaches and low energy levels may last for a couple of days but the benefits will be worth it.
- alternatively, it is recommended that you reduce your intake by half-a-cup a day over a seven-day period building up to a level where you are consuming less than five caffeine containing drinks a week.
- once you have reached this level of consumption it will be easier to take the decision to remove caffeine from your diet altogether.
- during this process always make sure you have a substitute drink available such as fruit or herbal teas and drink plenty of water.

If you are concerned about your caffeine intake, the following website may be helpful in addressing this -[www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)