

The Healthy Alternative?

That's right—it's coffee!

In a world where the “it’s bad for you” police are always telling us to stop doing what feels good, it’s nice to get a break from the gloom and doom.

A coffee break, that is. Turns out coffee is good for you, despite what the nattering nabobs of negativity have been preaching.

The much-maligned drink of choice for 108 million Americans has a variety of health benefits—according to a spate of recent research from such sources as the Harvard Medical School and the American Medical Association.

In recent decades, some 19,000 studies have examined coffee’s impact on health. The findings are as pleasing as a perfectly brewed cappuccino: Coffee is a near wonder drug that can lower the risk of diabetes, discourage the development of colon cancer, improve cognitive function, and reduce the risk of Parkinson’s disease.

Wait. I’m just warming up. Coffee increases alertness and helps us think better and faster. It’s been shown to improve performance in long-duration physical activities. It can stop a headache and boost your mood. It’s a laxative. There’s also evidence that coffee may help manage asthma and even control attacks when medication is unavailable.

And that’s not all. It may reduce the risk of cirrhosis of the liver, the risk of Alzheimer’s disease, and gallstones. It can lessen the risk of suicide among women, as well as the risk of gout in men over age 40.

What is in coffee that gives it this power? This seemingly commonplace beverage has a profoundly complex chemical makeup. Coffee contains more than 800 compounds that contribute to its chemical effects on the body, its flavor, and its aroma.

Some of coffee’s reported benefits are a direct result of its higher caffeine content. An 8-oz. cup of drip coffee contains about 85

mg of caffeine—about three and a half times more than the same serving of tea or cola, or 1 oz. of chocolate. The consumption of caffeine is directly linked to the reduced risk of Parkinson’s disease, according to the Vanderbilt University Institute for Coffee Studies.

Coffee has lots of antioxidants that may protect against free radical damage to tissues. One study found that coffee has more antioxidant activity than red wine, green tea, or orange juice. Roasted coffee contains the anticancer compound methylpyridinium, which helps reduce tooth plaque and prevent cavities.

Coffee is not completely innocent, of course. Caffeine is a mildly addictive stimulant. And it does have modest cardiovascular effects, such as increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, and occasional irregular heartbeat. In some people, coffee may cause

anxiety and insomnia. Some health authorities remain concerned about the effects of coffee drinking on heart disease, women’s fertility, and certain forms of cancer, although for the most part recent studies seem to exonerate the beverage on these issues.

The key here is moderation. Limit yourself to two to four cups a day. Excessive amounts of anything, even healthful things, tend to cause harm. Few people will be especially bothered by one or two cups of coffee, but adverse effects are much more likely for those gulping down eight to 10 cups a day.

So drink up. And while you’re at it, have a slice of chocolate cake, too. Recent research gives thumbs up to chocolate as the new “health food.”

Is life good, or what?

