

Study: Coffee may reduce risks of multiple sclerosis

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For decades the health effects of America's favorite morning beverage have been the subject of debate.

In the early 1970s research suggested drinking coffee was bad for your heart. A couple of decades later researchers had come to the opposite conclusion.

The [latest research project](#) to weigh in on the subject suggests coffee drinkers may have a lower risk of developing multiple sclerosis (MS), a disease that often shows up in young adulthood.

“Caffeine intake has been associated with a reduced risk of Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases, and our study shows that coffee intake may also protect against MS, supporting the idea that the drug may have protective effects for the brain,” said study author Dr. Ellen Mowry of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

Mowry's work is actually the study of a study. She and her team looked at a Swedish study of 1,629 people with MS and 2,807 healthy people. They also examined a U.S. study of 1,159 people with MS and 1,172 healthy people.

The studies measured coffee consumption among persons with MS 1 and 5 years before MS symptoms began, comparing it to coffee consumption among people who did not have MS.

Six cups a day

The Swedish study found that people who drank at least 6 cups of coffee per day -- what you'd call heavy coffee drinkers -- had a better chance of avoiding the disease.

They reached that conclusion because people who didn't drink coffee at all appeared to have one-and-a-half times the risk of developing MS. The earlier in life you started drinking coffee, it seemed, the better. Drinking large amounts of coffee 5 or 10 years before symptoms typically start was similarly protective.

In the US study, a similar pattern appeared. People who didn't drink coffee were also about one and a half times more likely to develop the disease than those who drank 4 or more cups of coffee per day in the year before symptoms started to develop the disease.

“Caffeine should be studied for its impact on relapses and long-term disability in MS as well,” said Mowry.

Evolving view of caffeine

Caffeine has only recently come to be viewed as potentially beneficial. In the past health experts were skeptical of the drug because of its tendency to temporarily increase the heart rate and elevate blood pressure.

But coffee's health benefits apparently extend beyond caffeine to the properties in the bean itself. A [2014 study](#) by the National Cancer Institute found that even decaffeinated coffee may be good for the liver.

Previous studies have linked coffee consumption with a lower the risk of developing diabetes, cardiovascular disease, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease, cirrhosis, and liver cancer.

"Our findings link total and decaffeinated coffee intake to lower liver enzyme levels. These data suggest that ingredients in coffee, other than caffeine, may promote liver health. Further studies are needed to identify these components," lead researcher Dr. Qian Xiao said at the time.

Not all researchers agree that coffee is a health beverage. A [2013 study](#) at the University of South Carolina concluded that drinking four cups a day raises your risk of dying prematurely if you're under 55.

But the researchers concede it might not have anything to do with what's in the coffee. Instead, they say coffee consumption could be related to other unhealthful activities, including heavy drinking and smoking.