



CAFFEINE WITHDRAWAL

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Caffeine is a naturally occurring substance found in over 60 varieties of plants, the most common being coffee beans, cocoa, tea leaves and kola nuts. The medicinal and energizing effects of these plants were known since before recorded history. In 1819, German chemist Friedlieb Ferdinand Runge identified and extracted caffeine, a unique chemical that he named after coffee. Today, caffeine is more readily available to the average person than ever. 80-85% of US adults consume caffeine daily, most commonly in coffee, tea, soda, energy drinks, chocolate, and some medications.^{1,2}

OVERCONSUMPTION LEADS TO WITHDRAWAL

Despite being so readily available, caffeine is a central nervous system stimulant, and is considered the most widely used psychoactive substance in the world. While occasional consumption of caffeine in recommended amounts may have positive effects on the body and mind, habitual use may lead to physical dependence.

Withdrawal makes physical and mental functioning difficult without your regular caffeine intake. Moreover, quitting caffeine altogether may become a very unpleasant and daunting task. The DSM-5 Manual of Mental Disorders has recognized caffeine withdrawal as a mental disorder. This is because stopping ongoing caffeine consumption can significantly interfere with normal day-to-day functioning and work-related activities.

SYMPTOMS OF CAFFEINE WITHDRAWAL

Symptoms of caffeine withdrawal may start as early as 12 to 24 hours after the last “dose” and tend to peak between 24 and 48 hours after the last caffeine intake. Symptoms may persist for up to 9 days, however, there are some reports that certain symptoms may last from several weeks to a few months following the discontinuation of caffeine. Symptoms of caffeine withdrawal commonly include.^{3,4}

- › Headache
- › Fatigue or drowsiness
- › Decreased energy level
- › Depressed mood and/or irritability
- › Difficulty concentrating

- › Brain fog
- › Muscle aches and/or stiffness
- › Nausea and/or vomiting

AVOIDING DEPENDENCE AND WITHDRAWAL

The best way to prevent caffeine dependence is by limiting caffeine in your diet. There is not one definitive and safe amount or frequency of caffeine intake that fits everyone. While the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) states that healthy adults may safely consume up to 400mg of caffeine a day, the American Medical Association Council on Scientific Affairs advises limiting the intake to no more than 250mg a day ⁵. It is always important to remember that every person's body type, sensitivity to caffeine and genetic predisposition are different.

Drinking multiple cups of coffee daily or having difficulty functioning without your regular caffeine intake may be a sign of caffeine dependence. What are the best strategies to reduce or quit caffeine without going through caffeine withdrawal?

1. Gradual reduction. Reducing caffeine intake gradually can be accomplished within a period of a few weeks for most people. For individuals who consume caffeine in higher amounts and do it more frequently, weaning off may take longer.
2. Gradual substitution. Another strategy is the gradual substitution of caffeinated beverages with decaffeinated ones. Start by substituting a quarter of a cup of tea, coffee or soda with its decaf equivalent. Later, increase the amount of the decaf beverage to half a cup, and so forth.
3. Hydration. It is very important to stay hydrated during the period of caffeine withdrawal. Hydration helps support your health and reduces the adverse effects of withdrawal.
4. Rest time. When quitting caffeine over a short timeframe, it is important to obtain the necessary rest and sleep. It is also recommended to not

engage in strenuous physical activities or tasks that require substantial mental concentration during this period.

5. Psychological comfort. Research shows that for a lot of people, consumption of caffeinated foods and beverages is not as much about caffeine as the process itself. Some individuals derive comfort and wellbeing from the ritual of holding a cup of warm coffee or tea and smelling its aroma. Other people drink colas because the sweet taste is a positive memory, and some people get caffeine from their favorite chocolate candy. If you are mainly leaning on caffeine for psychological comfort, then simple adjustments can do the trick. For example, replacing a cup of black or green tea with an herbal one, a cola with a caffeine-free version, or a chocolate bar with a chocolate-free dessert can be equally satisfying for the mind and taste buds while being caffeine-free.

SAFE IN MODERATION

When used in moderation caffeine can provide multiple benefits. It helps to enhance alertness and mental clarity, improve mood, boost athletic performance and stimulate metabolism. However, a lack of public education about its effects makes it easy to consume too much and even become physically dependent. Subsequently, quitting caffeine often triggers caffeine withdrawal.

You should not be discouraged from ever consuming caffeine for fear of dependence. For the majority, physical dependence on caffeine is much less serious than that on nicotine, alcohol, or illicit drugs. Consistently following the strategies listed above helps reduce caffeine intake or stop use altogether without going through withdrawal.

References

1. [Caffeine and long work hours](#)
2. [Beverage caffeine intakes in the US](#)
3. [Caffeine: how to hack it and how to quit it](#)
4. [Benefits and risks of caffeine and caffeinated beverages](#)
5. [Quitting caffeine the headache-free way](#)