

Caffeine

Caffeine stimulates the stress response. This can produce increased heart rate and blood pressure, tremor, a jittery feeling, rapid and shallow breathing, and emotional effects such as anxiety, fear, or irritability.

If you have been having difficulty with stress, anger, or anxiety, the last thing you need is a chemical that makes the stress response system more active. Caffeine can also aggravate tension headache, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic pain, and other physical problems. It doesn't seem to affect depression directly, but by intensifying stress and anxiety caffeine may contribute to the problem.

Caffeine is an addictive drug. Heavy users can become psychologically dependent on it, develop tolerance (meaning that more caffeine is needed to get the same effects), and undergo withdrawal if they don't get it. Withdrawal symptoms include headache, drowsiness, irritability, and difficulty concentrating.

Many people discover that they are dependent when they go for a day or two without coffee and develop splitting headaches. (If you suffer from headaches, think about whether they occur when you haven't had your usual coffee.) Addiction to caffeine isn't too serious a problem. The question is whether its effects are disrupting your life.

How much caffeine does it take to become dependent? Estimates vary, but 450 milligrams per day is about average. Some people are much more sensitive to caffeine, others less. The table below can help you to calculate your average daily consumption. Notice the serving sizes. Your coffee cup may hold more than this. Use a measuring cup to check, then adjust your calculation accordingly (for example, if your cup holds 16 ounces, double the amount of caffeine). The amounts of caffeine are approximate.

Substance	Approx. mg		No. per day	Total
Coffee				
Drip (8 oz./240ml)	210	x	_____	= _____
Percolated (8 oz.)	150	x	_____	= _____
Instant freeze-dried (8 oz.)	110	x	_____	= _____
Decaffeinated (8 oz.)	5	x	_____	= _____
Espresso (1.5 oz. shot)	90	x	_____	= _____
Tea				
5-minute steep (8 oz.)	95	x	_____	= _____
3-minute steep (8 oz.)	55	x	_____	= _____
Other				
Hot cocoa (8 oz.)	15	x	_____	= _____
Regular or diet cola (12 oz.)	45	x	_____	= _____
Most other soft drinks (12 oz.)	0	x	_____	= _____
Small chocolate bar	25	x	_____	= _____
Total				= _____

In addition to the foods in the table, foods with guarana also contain caffeine – even though the label may not indicate this fact. Energy and “health” drinks often contain guarana, which will be listed as an ingredient. If you are attempting to limit your caffeine intake, avoid drinks with guarana.

It can sometimes be a good idea to reduce your caffeine consumption in order to see whether this helps you. This is especially likely to be helpful if:

- a) Stress, anger, or anxiety are significant problems for you, and
- b) Your total is over 450 mg or you suspect that caffeine affects you negatively.

If you decide to reduce your caffeine consumption, do so slowly to avoid withdrawal symptoms. If you drink ten cups of coffee a day, reduce to seven cups, then four, then two, then one, then none. Stay at each level for four to six days to allow your body to adjust. Drink as much herbal tea as you like, and feel free to have decaffeinated coffee, tea, and cola.

Based on your calculation above, are you comfortable with the amount of caffeine you are consuming? If you have symptoms of anger or anxiety, could they be linked to caffeine?

If you want to experiment with reducing your caffeine consumption, what will be your first step?
