Caffeine May Protect Your Brain From Dementia, According to Harvard

6 MIN READ

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A new 43-year study found the lowest dementia risk among people who drank coffee and tea regularly.

Your coffee habit keeps looking better. In a large Harvard-led study, people who drank two to three cups of caffeinated coffee a day, or one to two cups of tea, had the lowest risk of dementia. This study tracked peopleâ??s habits for up to 43 years. Decaf drinkers saw no such benefit, and that detail has researchers looking hard at caffeine itself.

Researchers at Mass General Brigham, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and the Broad Institute followed **131,821 people**: 86,606 women from the Nurses' Health Study and 45,215 men from the Health Professionals Follow-up Study. Every two to four years, everyone filled out a detailed questionnaire about what they ate and drank. Over the course of the study, 11,033 of them developed dementia. The National Institutes of Health funded the work, which was published in *JAMA*.

Does Drinking Coffee Lower Your Risk of Dementia?

The top quarter of caffeinated coffee drinkers had an 18% lower risk of dementia than people who drank little or none. The top third of tea drinkers had a 14% lower risk. Coffee drinkers were also less likely to report that their memory and thinking were slipping (7.8% compared with 9.5%). In a group of about 17,000 nurses who took cognitive tests by phone, the biggest coffee and tea drinkers scored slightly higher on a standard screening test.

The benefit had a ceiling. Risk was lowest at two to three cups of coffee, one to two

cups of tea, or about 300 milligrams of caffeine a day. Drinking more than that added nothing.

Decaf had no link to lower dementia risk in this study. “We didn’t observe any association between decaf coffee and dementia,” lead author Yu Zhang, a research trainee at Mass General Brigham, told WBUR. The researchers think that gap points to caffeine as the active ingredient, though they stop short of calling it settled science. They also offer a second explanation: Some people switch to decaf because of health problems, which could skew the comparison.

As for how caffeine might help, the authors point to **earlier research** showing that it may block adenosine receptors in the brain. It may also slow the buildup of **amyloid-beta**, ease inflammation, and improve insulin sensitivity. One encouraging detail for anyone with dementia in the family: The link held for people at high genetic risk, including those who carry the APOE4 gene variant.

Can Coffee Really Prevent Dementia?

This study can’t answer that. It observed people’s habits over time, most of them health professionals, and it never asked what kind of tea they drank. Senior author Daniel Wang, M.D., Sc.D., of Mass General Brigham and Harvard said caffeinated coffee or tea “can be one piece of that puzzle,” alongside the other ways people protect their thinking as they age.

How Much Coffee Should You Drink a Day for Brain Health?

- **Measure your mug.** The study counted a cup as eight ounces. A 16-ounce travel mug is two cups.
- **Aim for the middle.** Risk was lowest at two to three cups of coffee or one to two cups of tea a day. For total caffeine from all sources, the low point was about 300 milligrams.

- **Stop at three.** Extra cups added no benefit, and the researchers note that too much caffeine can disturb sleep and raise anxiety.

- **Know your caffeine window** If caffeine keeps you up, have your coffee and tea in the morning. A **2023 analysis of 24 studies** estimated that a cup of coffee should be finished about nine hours before bed to protect your sleep time.Â
- **Brew through paper.** In **a Norwegian study of more than 500,000 adults**, filtered coffee was linked to a 15% lower risk of death than no coffee, and to lower mortality than unfiltered brews.

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