Dear Alice,

I just recently switched to decaf coffee, and someone told me that it can affect cholesterol levels? Is this true? Thank you.

Answer

Why did the coffee bean cross the road? To get to their daily grind! Research has shown that coffee (both decaf and caffeinated) may temporarily increase blood cholesterol levels, though the effects may be minimal. However, this primarily applies to frequent coffee drinkers (those who sip more than four cups per day) and people with an already heightened risk of developing heart disease. Additionally, the effect it may have can be dependent on how the coffee was brewed.

While there’s a common misconception that caffeine is to blame for coffee-heightened cholesterol, the cholesterol-raising effect of coffee has actually little to do with the caffeine content. In fact, the cream and sugar that many folks add to their coffee is a more likely cause of an increase in cholesterol than the caffeine content. Both caffeinated and decaffeinated coffee beans contain the chemical compounds cafestrol and kahweol. Although the exact chemical pathway is still being researched, preliminary findings suggest that cafestrol and kahweol interfere with hormone receptors specific to lipid metabolism and detoxification in the blood stream, potentially leading to an increase in cholesterol levels.

Considering tossing your coffee maker? Before you do, research has shown that filtering your coffee (no matter the bean type or caffeine level) helps to minimize effects on blood cholesterol levels. This is because filters (both paper and mesh) are able to retain the chemical compounds in the coffee beans that interfere with cholesterol levels. The same applies to coffee pods. On the flip side, unfiltered coffee (coffee made with a French press, percolator, etc.) may have slightly greater effects on cholesterol levels.

While research has been conclusive about the effects of cafestrol and kahweol on cholesterol levels, those effects are temporary, and often only apparent in people who drink more than a few cups per day. Additionally, it may calm your caffeine jitters to know that coffee is relatively low on
the list of cholesterol-raising activities such as excess drinking, smoking, and unhealthy eating habits. Sticking to filtered coffee and keeping your consumption down may minimize the cholesterol-raising effects of your daily cup(s) of Joe. Enjoy!

Alice!
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