Dear Alice,

Is there a difference between guarana and caffeine? Is guarana better for you than caffeine?

Answer

Dear Reader,

For those who can't stomach the bitter taste of coffee, products made from the seeds of the guarana (Paullinia cupana) plant may seem like a better aid for staying awake and alert. Guarana, which has the same stimulatory effects as caffeine, has been used for centuries, originating in Brazil and Venezuela. In addition to help keeping you awake, the saponins, tannins, and resins in guarana have been shown to support weight loss, improve memory, and act as an antioxidant in the body. However, since herbs and supplements are unregulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the products available on the market may not live up to their purported benefits.

What we do know is that guarana has become increasingly popular as a food additive and dietary supplement in the United States. It can be found in "energy" and vitamin-enhanced drinks, reportedly added in order to provide energy and increase alertness. Guarana has also been used to promote weight loss when combined with other ingredients. It's still undecided whether all of these effects are due to the caffeine the plant contains, its other active ingredients, or both.

As with many supplements that seem too good to be true, there may be some risks associated with this miracle plant. Anecdotal reports and case studies have linked anxiety, heart palpitations, flatulence, diarrhea, chest pain, and even death to use of guarana supplements. To further muddy the waters, herbal remedies and dietary supplements don't have to be approved by the FDA, meaning their health claims aren't validated. Therefore the amount of active ingredient in a guarana pill can vary greatly from what's on the bottle label. Some formulas may contain three times the extract-amount listed on the label, while another may not have any at all. Unfortunately for the consumer, there is no way to determine amounts without a laboratory test.

It seems that the key to successful guarana use would be to buy it from a trusted brand, use it sparingly, and see how it works for you before making it a regular part of your routine. While
guarana seems to deliver the same pick-me-up that many coffee drinkers have come to rely on, if you're concerned about possible health risks you might want to stick with a caffeine source more familiar to your body and better regulated — coffee, tea, or even a swig of good old-fashioned cola.

Alice!

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