

*Helping you live
well to learn well*

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Caffeine is a drug that acts as a stimulant to your brain and nervous system. It is naturally occurring in coffee beans, tea leaves, cacao beans (used to make chocolate), yerba mate, and guarana berry. It is also found as an additive in soda and energy drinks, and can be taken as a supplement.

People have been consuming caffeine for thousands of years, and it remains the most commonly consumed psychoactive substance in the world. It is used primarily to promote wakefulness and alertness, and enhance cognitive and physical performance. However, too much caffeine can have negative side effects, causing some people to want to cut back.

How much is too much?

Up to 400 mg of caffeine per day (roughly the amount of caffeine in four cups of brewed coffee) is considered “safe” for most healthy adults.* People who are pregnant or lactating should limit their caffeine use; those with certain medical conditions or who are taking certain medications may be advised to avoid caffeine altogether.

People have different sensitivities and tolerances to caffeine. You may want to consider reducing your intake if you’re drinking more than four cups of caffeinated coffee a day (or the equivalent), or you have unpleasant side effects such as:

- Nervousness, anxiety, and irritability
- Feeling jittery
- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Stomach problems
- Fast heartbeat
- Muscle tremors

Avoid consuming caffeine on an empty stomach, which can increase side effects. (Note that using caffeine to avoid or delay eating can cause digestive issues and lead to overeating later.)

Tips for cutting back

If you are interested in reducing your caffeine intake, the following tips may be helpful.

Consider your habits:

- Start paying attention to how much caffeine you’re consuming each day. Make sure to check the labels of food and energy drinks.
- Are you using caffeine out of habit, or do you feel like you “need” it? Ask yourself whether you might need something else instead – like more sleep, food, or water.

Tips for reducing caffeine use



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- What do you like about caffeine? What are the pros and cons of consuming caffeine?

Decrease your intake gradually to avoid withdrawal symptoms:

- Start by drinking one fewer—or a smaller—cup of coffee (or equivalent) each day.
- Switch to decaf during one or more of your daily coffee breaks.
- Create a “deadline” to stop consuming caffeine late in the day.
- Combine your caffeine intake with a snack. The rate that caffeine is absorbed into the body slows down when taken with food.
- Swap energy drinks for single sources of caffeine, like coffee or tea. Energy drinks often have higher, more concentrated levels of caffeine, and may be unregulated (if they have a “supplement facts” label instead of a “nutrition facts” label).
- If you like having a warm beverage as part of your daily routine, consider decaffeinated coffee, herbal tea, apple cider, or hot chocolate.

Note that an abrupt decrease in caffeine may cause withdrawal symptoms including headaches, fatigue, irritability, and difficulty focusing. Fortunately, these symptoms are usually mild and resolve after a few days.

Need support?

Schedule an appointment with a medical provider or a nutritionist at Cornell Health: visit health.cornell.edu/appointments.

