

Coffee or Tea?

To beat depression, the answer is tea. Drinking three cups of tea a day lowers the risk of depression by 37%, and the benefit doubles when you go to six cups a day. That's what a team of researchers concluded after analyzing 11 studies involving nearly 23,000 people. The results apply to green and black teas, but not herbal teas, which lack real tea leaves from the *Camellia sinensis* plant. The mood-lifting effects of tea are not just due to caffeine. Tea has several ingredients that protect brain cells: catechins, flavonoids, polyphenols, and L-theanine.



Where does this leave the coffee drinker? The news there is also good, in moderation. Coffee prevents depression, but only up to a maximum of 1.75 metric cups a day (about one mug). After that first mug, the benefits level off, and too much coffee (over two mugs a day) increases the risk of depression. These guidelines are based on caffeinated coffee and were distilled from 12 studies involving nearly 340,000 people.

Moderating Caffeine

Small amounts of caffeine are helpful for mood, regardless of the source, but too much can increase the risk of depression. The safe upper limit is 300 mg/day. Let's look at how that limit translates to daily cups ("cups" here refers to the measuring cups used in baking):

Beverage	Max metric cups/day
Brewed Coffee	2
Latte or mocha	2.5
Espresso	0.5
Instant Coffee	5
Brewed black tea	6
Brewed green tea	10
Bottled tea	8
Cola	6
Energy drink	1.5
Energy shot	0.3

Drinking half a cup of coffee every few hours (again, that's a metric cup!) is about all that's needed to improve alertness. Any more may just go to waste, or cause anxiety and addiction. Indeed, anxiety is such a common side effect of caffeine that anyone with anxiety ought to try cutting out caffeine for two weeks to see if it improves (slowly lower it down to prevent withdrawal headaches). Another strategy is to switch to tea, which has ingredients that balance out the anxiety-provoking effects of caffeine.

Timing is also important. Caffeine's effects can last up to 9 hours (average is 6 hours). Any caffeine after 2:00 p.m. can worsen mood by disrupting sleep.

Other Health Benefits

Coffee and tea have physical health benefits as well. Both lower the risk of diabetes, dementia, cancer, liver problems, and heart disease. Sweeteners, whether in the form of sugar, honey, or artificial sugars, can reverse those health benefits. Xylitol, a plant-based sweetener, is one of the healthier options.

Just as with mental health, tea is the safer option for the body. The high caffeine content of coffee can worsen some heart conditions, and even decaffeinated coffee contains acids that can worsen heartburn. Moreover, tea has an ingredient that balances caffeine's tendency to elevate blood pressure and anxiety: L-theanine.

Caffeine Dependence

The downside to caffeine is that it can cause physical and psychological dependence within a few days. As tolerance develops, people require more caffeine to achieve the same results.

Too much caffeine can cause anxiety, racing heart, high blood pressure, reflux or heartburn, tremor, and insomnia. These problems are not as bad with tea, which has other ingredients to moderate those effects. Caffeine can also increase the side effects some medications, like stimulants for ADHD (Adderall, Vyvanse, Ritalin, Concerta, Focalin), or wakefulness-promoting agents like Nuvigil and Provigil.

How to Lower Caffeine

If you have insomnia, anxiety, tremor, dry mouth, heartburn (reflux), or high blood pressure you may do well to lower caffeine. But don't stop right away, as that can cause withdrawal symptoms. Those start about 12-24 hours after your last drink, and include: headaches, irritability, fatigue, muscle aches, and mental fogging.

Lower caffeine slowly, reducing the dose every 2-3 days by the amount in the chart. If you have withdrawal symptoms, slow down further. Drink plenty of water and get good sleep and exercise. That will further ease the withdrawal.

Beverage	Lower by
Coffee	¼ of a cup every 2-3 days
Soda	½ a can every 2-3 days
Energy drinks	¼ a can every 2-3 days
Tea	½ cup every 2-3 days

—Chris Aiken, MD, and Heather Herman, PMH-NP