

Caffeine: How much is too much?

If you rely on caffeine to wake you up and keep you going, you aren't alone. Caffeine stimulates the central nervous system, alleviating fatigue, increasing wakefulness, and improving concentration and focus.

When to consider cutting back

For most healthy adults, moderate doses of caffeine — 200 to 300 milligrams (mg), or about two to four cups of brewed coffee a day — aren't harmful. But some circumstances may warrant limiting or even ending your caffeine routine. Read on to see if any of these apply to you.

Although moderate caffeine intake isn't likely to cause harm, too much can lead to some unpleasant effects. Heavy daily caffeine use — more than 500 to 600 mg a day — may cause:

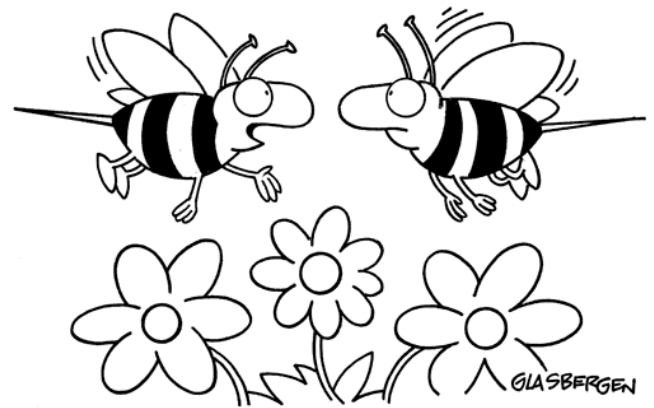
- Insomnia
- Nervousness
- Restlessness
- Irritability
- Stomach upset
- Fast heartbeat
- Muscle tremors

Curbing your caffeine habit

Whether it's for one of the reasons above — or because you want to trim your spending on pricey coffee drinks — cutting back on caffeine can be challenging. An abrupt decrease in caffeine may cause caffeine withdrawal symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, irritability and nervousness. Fortunately, these symptoms are usually mild and resolve after a few days.

To change your caffeine habit more gradually, try these tips:

- Keep tabs. Start paying attention to how much caffeine you're getting from foods and beverages. It may be more than you think. Read labels carefully. Even then, your estimate may be a little low because not all foods or drinks list caffeine. Chocolate, which has a small amount, doesn't.
- Cut back. But do it gradually. For example, drink one fewer can of soda or drink a smaller cup of coffee each day. Or avoid drinking caffeinated beverages late in the day. This will help your body get used to the lower levels of caffeine and lessen potential withdrawal effects.
- Go decaf. Most decaffeinated beverages look and taste the same as their caffeinated counterparts.
- Shorten the brew time or go herbal. When making tea, brew it for less time. This cuts down on its caffeine content. Or choose herbal teas that don't have caffeine.
- Check the bottle. Some over-the-counter pain relievers contain caffeine — as much as 130 mg of caffeine in one dose. Look for caffeine-free pain relievers instead.



“I can't get a good buzz going until I've had at least three cups of coffee!”

Cartoon used with special permission from glasbergen.com