

Avoid a Caffeine Conniption

--Kori Propst, MS, LPC

Ninety percent of Americans admit to regular use of caffeine. That makes caffeine the most widely used drug in America. More than 20% of Americans have more than 600 mg (more than 6 cups of coffee) each day! With its long list of positive benefits and few harmful side effects, why not?

Well, despite its low risks, it's easy to develop dependence on caffeine. Most who have caffeine in high amounts no longer use it for its ability to decrease fatigue, improve athletic performance, enhance mood, or boost memory. Instead, they use it to stave off the withdrawal symptoms that come along when they don't use it! Have you ever experienced that pounding headache when you don't get your morning coffee?

How caffeine operates in your body:

1. Caffeine reaches all the body's organs within 40-60 minutes
2. Physiological changes can last up to 6 hours and include a "stress response" that increases the cells' activity, similar to the flight or fight response
3. Adrenaline increases, which spurs dilation of the pupils and breathing tubes, increased heart rate, more blood to the muscles, increased blood pressure, muscle contraction, and glucose released from the liver to the blood stream for fuel.

Studies indicate that the performance enhancing benefits of caffeine; however, exist within a certain range and are stronger with non-users than chronic users. When used consistently, like with many other substances, the body develops a tolerance to caffeine. The response of many when they no longer feel the effects is to increase the dosage. Severe consequences can occur when the amount of caffeine is continuously increased.

Signs and Symptoms of Tolerance/Chronic Use

1. High blood pressure
2. Decreased bone density
3. Jittery nerves
4. High blood sugar
5. Sleeplessness
6. Withdrawal symptoms after discontinuing use (headache, irritability, drowsiness, inability to concentrate, low energy, fatigue)

Interested in learning how to curb your habit and realize the benefits of caffeine again? Follow these 5 steps to begin controlling your caffeine consumption:

1. Get more rest, and aim for 7-8 hours of sleep per night (when weaning from caffeine, it's likely you will experience fatigue)
2. Create a caffeine log and jot down all caffeine intake (morning coffee, soda with lunch, afternoon tea, Red Bull before your workout) to get a sense for the total milligrams you're consuming each day (use www.energyfiend.com for caffeine content listings)
3. Each day, for one week, sub one un-caffeinated beverage for one containing caffeine. The following week, do the same until you reach a total consumption of 100mg/day.
4. Once at this level, try using no amount of caffeine for a few days. You may experience withdrawal symptoms very quickly or within a few days. If you can get through the symptoms, it's likely you've mastered your habit. You may need to

- decrease your consumption more gradually, tapering to 25mg/day before going cold turkey.
5. Finally, moderate the stress in your life and develop strategies for dealing with anxiety or crises in a more functional manner. Reaching for the joe is not always the best response when faced with a stressful event. Work with a dietician to develop a caffeine consumption plan and/or a counselor to increase your resiliency to stress by having a plan for dealing effectively with anxiety.

(Reference: ACE Certified News, Dec. 2007/Jan 2008, p. 6-8)