

Weller Health Tip for Kids: Caffeine Confusion

Your mom says not to drink soda at night because the caffeine will keep you awake. And she says she “needs her caffeine” in the morning when she’s reaching for her cup of coffee. So what is caffeine, anyway?

Caffeine Is a Common Chemical

Caffeine is a natural chemical found in tea leaves, coffee beans, cacao (the stuff used to make chocolate), and cola nuts (the plant that gives cola soda its flavor). Caffeine has been in foods that humans eat and drink for hundreds of years. Today, caffeine is found in many common foods and drinks, such as coffee, tea, hot cocoa, soda, chocolate, and some medicines.

When humans drink or eat caffeine, it acts as a stimulant. Stimulants may make us feel more awake and alert. Many people drink liquids with caffeine because they think it helps them to wake up and feel sharper. But no one needs caffeinated drinks, especially kids. The best drinks for kids are water and milk, which don’t contain caffeine.

People who drink caffeine every day may start to depend on it. If regular caffeine users don’t get their regular daily dose, look out! People who are used to caffeine and don’t get it can develop headaches, stomachaches, and feel sleepy or grumpy all day long.

What Does Caffeine Do to Your Body?

Caffeine can cause your heart to pump faster and your breathing to quicken. You also may notice that caffeine makes you feel hyper and makes it harder to concentrate in school. Caffeine can boost a person’s energy temporarily, but a lot of caffeine can also cause other, not-so-great effects:

If you drink too much caffeine at one time, it can make you feel nervous or jumpy. Your hands may shake. Too much caffeine will make it hard to fall asleep, which might mean you won’t be able to pay attention in school the next day.

And too much caffeine can give you a stomachache, headache, or a racing heartbeat. In fact, kids with heart problems should not drink caffeine because it’s known to affect heart rates and force the heart to work harder.

Do You Need Caffeine?

Caffeine isn’t a nutrient, like calcium, so you don’t need a certain amount to be healthy. The United States doesn’t have guidelines about caffeine, but Canada does. That country recommends that kids who are 10 to 12 should get no more than 85 milligrams per day, equal to 22 ounces of caffeinated soda. (But that doesn’t mean drinking that much soda is a good idea. Stick with milk and water most often.)

Cutting the Caffeine

If you’d like to cut down on caffeine, talk with your parents. They can help you understand how much you’re getting and help you cut down gradually.

If you like soda once in a while, try to choose one that doesn’t contain caffeine. Clear lemon-lime sodas usually don’t, but it can be confusing, so check the ingredient list on the label. If you don’t, you might find yourself tossing and turning instead of snoozing and snoring!

This information was provided by the Weller Health Education Center. For more medically reviewed health information written for parents, kids and teens, please visit www.wellercenter.org.

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