

Answers to Your Food and Health Questions

By the American Institute of Cancer Research

Q: Does caffeine pose any health problems?

A: At one time, people thought caffeine posed a cancer risk, but that is no longer the case. Caffeine tends to raise blood pressure in everyone, however. This tendency is a legitimate concern for people with a blood pressure problem. Pregnant women are advised to avoid caffeine altogether. Caffeine may also worsen a number of small disorders, including: the face reddening disorder called rosacea, burning in the throat from reflux, and sleep problems. To end any of these effects, some people need to avoid virtually all caffeine, while others may be fine with a moderate consumption. Moderation means up to three cups (five-ounce cups, not 12-ounce mugs) of regular coffee per day.

Q: Should people on blood thinners stop eating lettuce?

A: No. although vitamin K, found in lettuce, enhances blood clotting, people on blood thinner medications may continue eating lettuce. Doctors set medication levels to accommodate a patient's normal intake in vitamin K. Thus, it's important that the amount of vitamin K in the diet remains fairly even. Lettuce contains vitamin K, but the major sources are dark leafy greens, like kale, collard, mustard, beet greens, turnip greens, Swiss chard and spinach. If someone eats large amounts of these foods regularly, medication levels will be set to accommodate higher levels of the vitamin. People not taking blood thinners adapt to varying intake of vitamin K without a problem.

Q: Are some people more likely to develop diabetes?

A: Yes. We are all more likely to develop diabetes as we get older. But those who are overweight, have a parent or sibling with diabetes, or lack regular exercise are much more likely to develop the disease. Women who have delivered a baby that weighed more than nine pounds at birth, or who had gestational diabetes while they were pregnant, are also at greater risk. The good news for those overweight is that modest weight loss (5-10 percent of starting weight), along with thirty minutes of walking at least five days a week, can slash the risk. Some research suggests that a diet low in fat (especially saturated fat) and high in fiber can offer further protection. Each of these steps can also help lower the risk of cancer as well.

Q: How much sodium is too much?

A: Unless someone has a medical condition that requires a stricter limit, total sodium consumption should be 2,400 milligrams (mg) or less per day. The greatest reason for limiting sodium is to control high blood pressure. When people keep sodium within this recommended level and eat more vegetables, fruits and beans, blood pressure drops markedly. People who cannot control their blood pressure with this limit and a mostly plant-based diet might find a limit of 1,500 mg effective. This low level requires extremely careful food choices. Another reason to limit sodium is the risk of stomach cancer. The American Institute for Cancer Research warns that diets high in salt and foods preserved with salt probably increase the risk of stomach cancer.

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