

Caffeine Withdrawal

Short Definition

Caffeine withdrawal was added to the most recent version of the [diagnostic and statistical manual \(DSM-V\)](#), and is characterized by a series of symptoms that occur when an individual who regularly consumes caffeine cuts back consumption.

Overview

Caffeine is a naturally occurring psychoactive stimulant that often goes unrecognized as a “drug” due to its common usage. Up to 90% of Americans consume caffeine daily, in the form of coffee, tea, energy drinks, or dietary supplements.

Not everyone who consumes caffeine will be negatively impacted, but side effects like headache, rapid heartbeat, flushing, and even sleep difficulties are commonly noticed with caffeine use even in moderate amounts (200 mg).

Because many people find it difficult to reduce their intake of caffeine, and notice physical and psychological side-effects when doing so, researchers presented evidence that called for caffeine withdrawal to be added to the DSM-V. Caffeine withdrawal and caffeine intoxication are currently diagnoses, and researchers continue to build evidence to add caffeine use disorder to the next manual.

Symptoms

Caffeine withdrawal symptoms can be different for everyone, and typically last anywhere from two to nine days. For someone who consumes caffeine regularly, even in small amounts, both cognitive and physiological symptoms are common when they reduce consumption.

Cognitive symptoms:

- Feelings of anxiety
- Feelings of depression
- Drowsiness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Brain fog
- Agitation or irritability

Physiological symptoms:

- Headache
- Fatigue

- Increased heart rate
- Flushed skin
- Abdominal pain, nausea, or gastric issues
- Hand tremors

Typically, the more coffee a person regularly consumes, the more severe the side-effects during withdrawal. However, researchers have noticed withdrawal effects even in those who regularly consume small amounts of caffeine (100 mg) per day, or the equivalent of one cup of coffee.

To be diagnosed with caffeine withdrawal, a patient must have recently significantly cut back or eliminated caffeine in their diet, and symptoms must be attributed to this syndrome by ruling out any other medical or mental health conditions such as migraines, meningitis or encephalitis, carbon monoxide poisoning, panic attacks, and other clinically significant conditions.

Causes

The cause of caffeine withdrawal is an individual significantly cutting back or cutting out caffeine, after consuming it on a regular basis. Reactions will vary depending on the biology of the person.

Most experts agree that caffeine is not necessarily good or bad, and that most people may consume it safely. However, there are some groups that may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of caffeine, and may wish to limit their intake. This includes:

- People who are pregnant or breastfeeding
- Children
- Those with IBS, or other gastrointestinal issues
- Individuals with certain chronic health conditions such as insomnia, anxiety, chronic migraines, or cardiac issues

Treatments

The treatment for caffeine withdrawal is most commonly education on appropriate reduction of caffeine intake.

Therapy

Therapy can be a helpful supplement for those who are trying to implement healthier lifestyle habits, such as reducing caffeine consumption. Studies show that overuse of caffeine is common in individuals who are experiencing other mental health conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, personality disorders, eating disorders or substance use disorders.

Therapy can help address any other underlying issues that may preclude a dependence on caffeine, as well as create and train new habits. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) in particular is a form of therapy that is designed to change negative patterns of thought and behavior and channel them into more positive avenues.

Other Treatments

Health experts agree that the best way to cut back caffeine consumption is to do so gradually. The first step is understanding how much caffeine is present in what you consume. Coffee is the most common culprit, but there can be hidden amounts of caffeine in a number of dietary supplements, over-the-counter medications, snacks, soft drinks, and tea products.

Strive to cut back consumption by 10% each week to avoid the most unpleasant side effects of caffeine withdrawal. Some strategies for doing this include:

- Replace regular coffee with decaf. If you drink a lot of coffee throughout the day, you can start replacing alternating cups with decaf, or even start cutting the regular coffee with decaf, making half-caf servings
- Replace soft drinks with fruit-infused water or flavored seltzer water
- Avoid diet supplements
- Switch to herbal teas
- Learn to check labels for caffeine content and familiarize yourself with amounts in common food and drink
- Take an OTC pain reliever for any headaches caused by withdrawal
- Aim to get 7-9 hours of quality sleep every night
- Avoid consuming any caffeine past noon, as this can interfere with sleep patterns

Resources

Psychotherapy, in particular cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be an effective way to learn new habits, through changing old patterns of behavior and replacing them with new ones. Licensed therapists can support the desire to cut back or cut out caffeine for those who feel that their consumption has detrimental effect on their lives. They can offer coping mechanisms, stress management strategies, and help clients identify and change old negative thought patterns into more positive directions.

Online therapy is an option that offers a variety of choices to individuals who may not otherwise have access to therapy due to geographical location or inability to travel to in-person sessions. Online therapy platforms like [BetterHelp](#) use a simple, targeted questionnaire to match users with a licensed therapist to meet their specific needs. Therapy sessions are conducted over video conferencing, private message, or even over the phone.

Statistics

Here are some key statistics on caffeine withdrawal:

In the United States, [around 90% of people](#) consume caffeine regularly, at an average of over 200 mg per day (which is approximately the equivalent of just over 2 6-oz cups of coffee)

In a survey of addiction professionals from 2013, researchers found that [95% of these professionals believed](#) that cessation of caffeine would cause a withdrawal syndrome, and 73% thought that this caffeine withdrawal can have clinical significance.

In that same survey, [58% of these professionals stated](#) that they believed some people develop a dependence on caffeine, although only 44% believed that this should be added to the diagnostic and statistical manual.

Research

In a 2017 comprehensive review, [researchers suggest that caffeine consumption is relatively safe](#) at levels that are presented in commercially available food and beverages. However, certain populations may be more vulnerable to the negative effects of caffeine including children, people who are pregnant or lactating, or those who experience mental illness. They also report that excess caffeine consumption can be harmful and recommend further study into emerging concerns about over-consumption of caffeine.

A review of evidence conducted in 2014 concluded that recent research on caffeine showed that [not all consumers were aware of the effects of caffeine dependency and withdrawal](#), and attributed signs like headache, fatigue, nausea, and other symptoms to illness.

Related Articles

Here are some articles you can visit to find out more about caffeine and its effects on the body:

- [The Perks And Pitfalls of Caffeine: How It Affects Anxiety And Stress](#)
- [Caffeine Addiction Is Real. Here's How To Beat It](#)
- [The Relationship Between Caffeine And ADHD](#)
- [Coffee And Mental Health: Is There A Connection?](#)
- [Is Coffee Anxiety Real?](#)