

Coffee helps beat depression

A study suggests that women who drink more than four cups of coffee a day are less likely to develop depression, writes AMANDA URSELL

DRINKING sensible amounts of coffee will not do most of us any harm — and may do some good. In the UK we do not have any guidelines as to what a “sensible” amount of caffeine really means, but it is usually interpreted as between four to five caffeine-containing drinks, coffee included, a day.

The exception is for pregnant women, who should stick with less than 200mg of caffeine a day, whatever the source. A higher intake may increase the risk of miscarriage.

As a guide, a mug of instant coffee has about 100mg of caffeine, a mug of filter coffee 140mg, a mug of tea about 75mg and a can of cola about 40mg. And, believe it or not, a 50g bar of milk chocolate has 25mg.

There is also data that suggests that women trying to get pregnant should stick near these levels, as too much caffeine may lessen the ability of a fertilised egg to implant in the lining of the uterus.

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But the study suggests that for most of us there could be a “good” side to coffee drinking.

A recent study suggests that women who drink more than four cups of coffee a day are less likely to develop depression. The researchers tracked a group of women over 10 years and found that those who drank more than

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four cups of coffee a day were 20 per cent less likely to develop depression compared with those who drank just one cup a week or less.

The research relied on the participants accurately reporting their coffee consumption. Assuming that they were generally right, the study suggests that caffeine could protect against depression by blocking a brain transmitter called adenosine, an action that gives a similar effect to upping production of the feel-good “hormone” dopamine.

If this hunch turns out to be right, then four cups of any drink that contains caffeine presumably can have the same effect and will not, according to the British Heart Foundation, give rise to familiar concerns about coffee such as causing an irregular heart beat or coronary heart disease.

It also will not make you dehydrated or especially jumpy or stressed.

If you look at coffee, rather than other drinks that contain

caffeine, interesting things start to emerge. For instance, like tea, it is rich in antioxidants called polyphenols, which are believed to have anti-ageing properties.

And laboratory studies have suggested that chlorogenic acid, one of coffee’s main polyphenols, helps to stop the formation of potentially cancer-causing nitrosamines.

One study in Japan — a country known for its love of green tea — suggested that while green tea contributed 34 per cent of total polyphenols from drinks, coffee provided 50 per cent.

Its effect on blood pressure is also worth noting. We know that caffeine increases our blood pressure if we drink it only rarely (although our bodies adjust within a few days and a tolerance develops).

What has been shown, however, is that the effects of caffeine in coffee on blood pressure is four to five times smaller than the effects of caffeine given in supplement form, suggesting that other things

in coffee help to counteract the caffeine’s action.

But this does not mean that we should suddenly start ordering extra cappuccinos and lattes. For a start, they both provide calories that you may forget to count in your daily total.

And if you drink a lot more coffee, it is inevitable that your intake of caffeine will shoot up — and the benefits of drinking moderate amounts could turn into downsides.

Coffee is one of the most widely consumed drinks in the world and caffeine is the most widely consumed pharmacologically active compound. Whichever way you look at it, caffeine is a stimulant of the central nervous system and, in excess, can lead to sleeplessness, sweating and rapid breathing in some people.

To reap coffee’s benefits — minus any unwanted effects — build it into overall sensible intakes of caffeine for the day, and you should be just fine. — The Times