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Coffee may lower risk of diabetes

Good news, java lovers: All those visits to Tim Hortons, Starbucks and Second Cup may turn out to be good for your health after all.

New research suggests that people who drink significant amounts of coffee daily have a markedly lower risk of developing diabetes.

The study, published in today's edition of the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, found that men who drink six or more cups of caffeinated coffee daily can lower their risk of diabetes by 54 per cent and women by 30 per cent.

The benefits of drinking decaffeinated coffee were more modest: a 26-per-cent risk reduction for men and 15 per cent for women.

But as little as a single cup of coffee daily can reduce a person's risk of diabetes, however drinking tea does not seem to have an influence, according to the research.

"The evidence is quite strong that regular coffee is protective against diabetes," said Dr. Frank Hu, an associate professor at the Harvard School of Public Health and one of the study's co-authors.

But he cautioned it would be imprudent to recommend heavy coffee consumption as a public health measure to prevent diabetes and did not suggest a daily intake level. Instead, he said maintaining a healthy weight, eating well and being physically active are better ways to avoid the devastating illness.

Contrary to popular belief, sugar consumption does not cause diabetes.

Rather, diabetes is a form of cardiovascular disease that has its roots in obesity and poor lifestyle choices.

When a person is overweight, sedentary and has high blood pressure or high cholesterol, this stresses all vital organs, causing the body to make too little insulin and to respond poorly to the insulin it does make.

Fluctuating insulin levels damage blood vessels, which can cause blindness and nerve damage that leads to amputation, kidney failure and heart failure.

Approximately two million Canadians have diabetes, and another 14.5 million are considered at high risk of developing the disease, making it one of the country's biggest public health challenges.

The new research, which followed 125,000 people over a 12- to 18-year period, provides the strongest data to date on the benefits of coffee drinking.

Earlier studies have shown it is also beneficial in the prevention of Parkinson's disease, gallstones, colon cancer, cirrhosis of the liver, and depression.

A cup of coffee can also prevent the onset of an asthma attack.

The downside is that coffee can interfere with sleep and make some people edgy.

(Reports that it raises the risk of pancreatic cancer proved to be unfounded.)

Despite all these findings, it is unclear how coffee drinking confers health benefits.

Dr. Hu said that while most of the attention focuses on caffeine, coffee is actually a complex beverage that contains many compounds and little is known about their biological effects.