

Caffeine facts

Is caffeine bad for you if you have insomnia?

Caffeine increases alertness, it works to inhibit the neurochemical adenosine which rises as we fall asleep.

Caffeine doesn't just come from coffee, tea and some fizzy drinks. You also get caffeine from chocolate (particularly dark chocolate) and some medicines, such as painkillers – so check if this is the case for you. However, coffee contains much more caffeine than tea, particularly coffee made from freshly ground beans from many of the high street coffee shops. The average high street shot of espresso has about 65-75mg of caffeine so an extra shot cappuccino is over 200mg of caffeine. Most experiments that have looked at normal volunteers taking caffeine have shown significant impact on wakefulness and reaction speeds at doses of 200mg.

Your body quickly absorbs caffeine. But it also gets rid of it quite quickly. Processed mainly through the liver, caffeine has a half-life of between three and seven hours. This means it takes your body 3-7 hours to eliminate half of it from your body. After about 10 hours, 75% of the caffeine is gone. For many people, a cup of coffee in the morning won't interfere with sleep at night. If you sleep well and drink caffeine, then caffeine is fine for you. However, for some it will interfere with sleep at night, and it is also the case that many people become habituated to coffee so in the morning feel fatigued and a little sluggish until they have had their first cup.

Consuming caffeine later in the day or having several cups, however, can interfere with sleep. If you're like most people, your sleep won't be affected if you don't consume caffeine at least six to eight hours before going to bed. Your sensitivity may vary, though, depending on your metabolism and the amount of caffeine you regularly consume. People who are more sensitive may not only experience insomnia but also have caffeine side effects of nervousness and gastrointestinal upset.

If you do plan to stop consuming caffeine, you will suffer withdrawal effects for 3-4 days. If you are habituated to coffee, and you find that you'd like a boost in the morning (e.g. to help with a long drive), then consider reducing your caffeine intake (or withdrawing altogether) during the rest of the day, so that the morning cup of coffee has a better chance of giving you that boost you're looking for. If chronic headache is an issue - consider reducing your caffeine intake. Caffeine also tends to increase tremor and worsen restless legs for those who have these problems and that can also cause difficulty falling asleep.

