Can Coffee Cause IBS Issues?

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Coffee and IBS

Irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) affects 10 to 15 percent of adults in the United States according to the American College of Gastroenterology. It causes symptoms such as abdominal pain and cramping, diarrhea, constipation, and urgency.

For most of us, coffee is the wake-up beverage of choice. But coffee is also stimulant and stimulants affect bowel function and cause diarrhea in some people.

How Coffee Affects IBS Symptoms

Most people, not just those with IBS, will experience tummy troubles after drinking coffee. Coffee, like other caffeinated drinks, stimulates the stomach and intestines and increases the movement of food through your digestive tract.

Unfortunately, one of the hardest dietary changes to make is quitting coffee because caffeine is addictive. Not only that, it is part of American culture.

Withdrawal symptoms of caffeine include painful headaches, loose stools, constipation, sleeplessness, and irritability. But withdrawal symptoms dissipate with time.

But for some people with IBS, giving up coffee might improve their symptoms and overall health.

Why Does Coffee Cause IBS Symptoms?

There are a number of ways that coffee affects IBS.

Coffee stimulates the Gastrointestinal (GI) Tract

Research has shown coffee may cause a laxative effect in people with IBS within four minutes of drinking coffee according to one study out of the University Hospital Utrecht, The Netherlands.

Even small amounts of coffee can have this effect and it's not just limited to caffeinated coffee; decaffeinated coffee has the same effect.

Caffeine accelerates stress hormones

Stress has been found to slow down or accelerate the bowels resulting in constipation or diarrhea.

Caffeine can accelerate the stress hormones cortisol, adrenaline, and norepinephrine. If the body is in a continual

state of increased stress, the gastrointestinal tract becomes irritated, causing cramping, abdominal pain, constipation, and/or diarrhea.

Coffee is Acidic

Because coffee is highly acidic, it can stimulate gastric gases. Both caffeine and coffee fuel gastric acid, but decaffeinated coffee has actually been shown to increase acidity more than regular coffee according to one study in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Because coffee increases acidity and stimulates gastric acids, it may speed up the process of gastric emptying. This results in the stomach contents passing through the small intestine too quickly.

Can Coffee Cause Constipation?

For some people, coffee causes constipation. It can also cause cramping and bowel spasms that keep stools from moving.

This is likely truer for people who drink coffee as a primary drink – especially if you are not drinking enough water.

What Other Options Do You Have?

Reduce your coffee intake.

If you are drinking multiple cups of coffee daily, you may want to lessen your coffee intake. You should also consider other sources of caffeine intake, including sodas or energy drinks.

It is possible that if you cut your caffeine by half your current consumption, you will see fewer IBS symptoms than you are seeing now.

Try a different brand.

Farming practices for coffee are different based on the brand. Trying a different brand, especially organic, may help to reduce some of your IBS symptoms.

Try decaf.

Switching to decaffeinated coffee can also help to reduce some your symptoms, although based on the evidence, components of coffee might also be triggers to your IBS symptoms. But triggers are different for each person so it possible decaffeinated coffee may not have the same effect on you.

Change creamers.

For some people with IBS, dairy may also be a trigger. Rather than using a dairy creamer, try non-dairy milk options, such as almond, coconut, or soy.

Try a different sweetener.

There are no artificial sweeteners that are all-natural and no artificial sweeteners are safe for people with IBS. Rather than using artificial sweeteners in your coffee, try honey, sugar, or agave nectar instead.

Eliminate coffee from your diet.

If you have figured out that coffee is a serious IBS trigger for you, then you may decide that you should stop drinking it altogether. Less caffeine is better for your overall health.

Alternative beverages

Tea has caffeine too and because it does, it may have the same stimulating effect coffee does. Tea, however, does not have as much caffeine as coffee.

Tea also contains an amino acid called L-Theonine. It is known for its calming and relaxing qualities and having such an effect may calm the stomach bowels and minimize IBS symptoms.

The Takeaway

Finding out whether coffee – regular or decaffeinated – has an effect on your IBS takes a trial and error approach. Trying a different brand or minimizing your coffee intake may help you reduce some of your symptoms.

Some of the ingredients you add to coffee, such as dairy products and sweeteners, can also cause you problems. Removing or changing these may also help you to minimize some of the IBS symptoms you have from drinking coffee.

Lastly, if you have tried everything and you still struggle with IBS symptoms after drinking coffee, you could consider alternate options to coffee that do not exacerbate your symptoms. Herbal teas, hot chocolate, and non-caffeine beverages are all good options.