

Questions patients ask

Q: Is coffee bad for the gallbladder?

A: No, in fact research suggests that drinking coffee may help to reduce the risk of developing gallbladder disease (or symptomatic gallstones) by up to 45% in men and up to 28% in women^{1,2}.

Q: What's the difference between gallstones and gallbladder disease?

A: Gallstones are hard, pebble-like deposits that form inside the gallbladder. About 80% of these cause no symptoms (non-symptomatic gallstones)³; however, in a minority of cases, gallstones trigger severe stomach pains (symptomatic gallstones). In these instances, the gallstones can cause the gallbladder to become inflamed and this leads to gallbladder disease.

Q: Is coffee safe for people with gallstones?

A: Yes, coffee is safe for people with gallstones. It may even be beneficial in the early stages of gallbladder disease, where it is thought to slow down the progression of non-symptomatic to symptomatic gallstones.

Q: I've heard that coffee is beneficial for people with gallstones. How much coffee would I need to drink to see a benefit?

A: Research suggests that the benefits of drinking coffee can be seen after one cup a day. The risk of developing symptomatic gallstones continues to fall up to four cups a day or more.

Q: To what extent will drinking coffee help to prevent gallstones?

A: Research suggests that drinking coffee can help prevent symptomatic gallstones (those that cause symptoms such as severe stomach pain), with effects observed with 2 to 3 cups per day. However, there appear to be differences in the extent of the benefits between men and women.

Q: I've heard that drinking coffee can make gallstones worse, is this true?

A: It is still early days in research terms, but the work to date suggests that in the early stages of the disease, coffee and caffeine can prevent, or delay, the development of symptomatic gallstones. However, in cases where gallbladder disease has developed, further coffee and caffeine might lead to more severe symptoms.

Q: Does decaffeinated coffee have the same benefits as regular coffee?

A: Strong, reliable studies show that caffeinated coffee reduces the risk of symptomatic gallstones and gallbladder disease, but decaffeinated coffee does not appear to have the same effect^{1,2}.

Q: Are the effects of coffee due to caffeine?

A: Some studies have shown that drinking caffeinated coffee regularly reduces the risk of symptomatic gallstones, but decaffeinated coffee does not appear to have the same effect^{1,2}. This would suggest that caffeine may have a preventive role in the development of symptomatic gallstones and gallbladder disease. But other coffee components may also play a role.

References

- 1 Leitzmann M.F. et al. (1999), A prospective study of coffee consumption and risk of symptomatic gallstone disease in men. *JAMA*, 281:2106-2112.
- 2 Leitzmann M.F. et al. (2002), Coffee intake is associated with lower risk of symptomatic gallstone disease in women. *Gastroenterol*, 123:1823-1830.
- 3 NHS. Gallstones. www.nhs.uk/conditions/gallstones/Pages/Introduction.aspx

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