



"One of the things that excites me is that coffee may have antioxidant compounds in it," says Dr. Peter Martin. Antioxidants are chemical agents linked to protection from many diseases.

# Coffee—The New Health Drink?

Researchers at Vanderbilt University investigate the possible health benefits of—drum roll, please—coffee.

If you ever doubt the appeal of coffee, look no further than some of television's most popular programs. Drs. Frasier and Niles Crane often banter at their favorite coffee

shop—after placing their impossibly finicky orders for rich, frothy lattes. Monica, Joey, and the rest of the *Friends* gang ooze perkiness as they crowd the coffee shop's sofa, sip-

ping their espressos and cappuccinos.

In real life, we, too, invigorate ourselves with coffee, whether cranking open an economy-size can of brew or grinding shade-grown beans to just-so consistency. Our java of choice wakes up humdrum mornings, perks up between-meal breaks, and fuels late-night sessions of tax preparation.

Even children instinctively love the aroma. Parents, however, usually refrain from letting them join in this grown-up pastime. After all, coffee may taste great, but, alas, it's not really good for you. ▶



PHOTOGRAPH BY J. SAVAGE GIBSON

Coffee seems to be the perfect complement to almost any occasion. Now the drink may also prove to be good for us.

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"Most of the negative things that people have talked about [concerning coffee] in the past really don't hold up on close examination."

Dr. Peter Martin

Hang on to your espresso, folks. Coffee may indeed benefit us. At least, that's under consideration by Vanderbilt University's Institute for Coffee Research, headed by Dr. Peter Martin. The Vandy professor of psychiatry and pharmacology also serves as director of the university's addiction center. His work in this area prompted his interest in researching coffee—not as an addictive substance but as a possible form of treatment.

### Coffee's Notoriety

Contrary to popular thought, coffee drinking is not addictive per se, he says. "I've not seen people rob banks or destroy their families or crash into cars because they've been drinking coffee," says Dr. Martin. "It's not addictive like heroin or alcohol, but there is something about it that, if you go without it, you'll miss it greatly."

Still, coffee has suffered a poor reputation ever since, as legend has it, an Ethiopian goat herder first created the potion. He noticed one of his flock chomping on coffee beans. This snack was followed by vigorous frolicking by the enthusiastic goat. Not above a little frivolity himself, the alert herdsman concocted



*Vanderbilt's coffee research centers on studying the complexities of the beverage's components, which may lead to health benefits.*

the first version of the sinfully delicious elixir.

Dr. Martin acknowledges the beverage's historical bad rap. Prior to his research, he personally avoided the drink in the name of healthy living. Now, armed with the facts and potential glad tidings, he indulges, savoring a coffee called (no kidding) "Dancing Goats."

But before he felt comfortable drinking coffee—or setting up the Institute for Coffee Research in 1999—Dr. Martin separated fact from fiction. This initial research led him to believe "most of the negative things that people have talked about [concerning coffee] in the past really don't hold up on close examination," he says. For example, a 1980s article concluded caffeine caused pancreatic cancer. "Now 20 years after that original article, a lot of my doctor colleagues [still] think that it's true," he says. "They don't know that a year or two later,



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there was another article basically retracting or disproving it."

Some of the research that he found associated positive effects with coffee drinking, but offered no answers as to why. Among coffee drinkers, he says, "Population studies showed reduced rates of cancer, suicide, and cirrhosis; and there's some preliminary work on Parkinson's disease. If you look at the rates of Parkinson's disease in relationship to how much people drink coffee, you'll find that individuals who don't drink coffee at all probably have a five times higher risk of having Parkinson's disease than those who do drink [coffee] in moderation." (He defines moderation as two to four cups a day.) "We needed to look into and try to explain how it is that these positive effects work," he continues. "What are the chemical, molecular, and physiological reasons for these protective qualities of coffee?"

#### The Institute's Purpose

Enter Dr. Martin and his colleagues, armed with lab beakers and credentials as deep as a Starbucks line. "We're not interested in how to make a better cup of coffee," he says. "We're interested in under-

#### COFFEE KLATSCH

For more information about java, visit [www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/coffee](http://www.mc.vanderbilt.edu/coffee).



"We're not interested in how to make a better cup of coffee. We're interested in understanding the secrets that the coffee bean holds vis-à-vis human health."

Dr. Peter Martin

standing the secrets that the coffee bean holds vis-à-vis human health." The Institute hopes to percolate data about coffee's components—and their possible benefits—with such traumatic afflictions as addiction, depression, and a host of diseases positively affected by antioxidants.

(Antioxidants are chemical agents in the body that help decrease the chances of heart disease, cancer, brain disorders, and other killers).

The findings so far suggest that coffee probably isn't the bad-boy beverage we once thought—and it may even be good for us. "We've just started looking into [drinking coffee] as protection against heart disease," he says. "People who drink coffee seem to have lower rates of these problems than people who don't drink coffee."

So should we forgo the apple a

day and drink two cups of java to keep the doctor away? "Doctors are waiting for the kind of research we're doing before they tell their patients that drinking coffee could be good for them," Dr. Martin says. On the other hand, he adds, "Doctors are certainly paying attention to this research."

As for Dr. Martin's own refreshment? "Now that I know that coffee may be good for me, I don't suppress my desire to drink it," he says.

Bring on the Dancing Goats.

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