New observational data associate high levels of coffee intake with reduced MS

By ACSH Staff — February 27, 2015

There are about 400,000 Americans with a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS), and 2.5 million worldwide, making it the most common neurological disease among younger and middle-aged people. Women are twice as likely to be diagnosed as men. Its cause is unknown, but MRI studies show a fairly diagnostic pattern of demyelinization: loss of the protective or insulating white matter in the brain and other areas of the central nervous system. While there is no cure, most cases stabilize or progress quite slowly, and there are now several therapeutic methods that suppress disease activity with minimal side effects.

If a common food product can be shown to prevent or reduce the risk of MS, that would be a major benefit. So now we have a new study in which two separate case-control cohorts were analyzed based on levels of coffee consumption (among other factors), and both showed about a one-third lower risk for MS among the highest levels of coffee ingestion as compared to non-coffee drinkers.

The combined studies are not published yet, so some details remain sketchy, but the broad features are available, released by the American Academy of Neurology and the lead author, Dr. Ellen Mowry, assistant professor of neurology at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore. The author and her co-authors studied two separate groups, one (584) American and the other (1,600) Swedish, with MS. They compared each case to controls without MS and assessed their coffee consumption over the previous 5 and 10 years (the case controls numbered 581 in the US and 2,800 Swedes).

The results were fairly consistent between the two groups: drinking six cups of coffee daily was associated with about one-third lower risk of developing MS over that period of time. Other factors known to be associated with risk of MS were controlled for, as best as it was feasible to do so. And the amount of coffee consumed was based upon retrospective dietary recall.

ACSHs Dr. Gil Ross had this comment: Under the best of circumstances, a finding of a 30 percent difference between a control and a study group in an observational report amounts to little support for a cause-and-effect relationship. When the data depend on dietary recall, the odds of a real finding go down even further. And there is no plausible biological mechanism to explain such an effect. Listen: I like coffee, a lot. But I d be remiss if I used this study to advise patients or readers...
here to ramp up their java intake to protect them from MS. The disease, while of major concern to those who have it and their loved ones, is uncommon and amenable to remittive therapies; forcing yourself to have 6+ cups of coffee each day is quite a burden unless you’re in Italy and not supported by this study.

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