



## A Little Wiser

# How healthy is decaf?

'Coffee is not unhealthy,' explains Vincenzo Fogliano, professor of Food Quality and Design, 'if drunk in moderation.'

In fact, one or two cups a day lowers the risk of diabetes, heart disease and strokes. Filter coffee is the healthiest; the filter actually keeps out some of the cafestol and kahweol, substances that increase LDL (bad) cholesterol. Cafetière coffee contains the most cholesterol-raising substances.

Coffee also contains the stimulant caffeine, which is a reason to drink it for a lot of people. It's not great, though, if you want to sleep or you are highly sensitive to caffeine. For such cases, there is decaf. But decaf is not completely caffeine-free either: one cup still contains about three milligrams of caffeine, compared to 60 to 90 milligrams in a regular cup of coffee.

Decaf is said to be bad for the drinker and for the climate because of the chemical process used to extract the caffeine from green, unroasted coffee beans. 'In the past, dichloromethane was used for that,' says Fogliano. 'That's a toxic substance that evaporates after the process. Nowadays, CO<sub>2</sub> is used. Under high pressure, this gas becomes a liquid in which the caffeine dissolves and then evaporates. It's a clean process and toxin-free.' But the process does take a lot of energy, which is not good for the climate. Only a few factories in Europe use this CO<sub>2</sub> method on a large scale, says Fogliano. 'Because of the enormous scale, bulk quantities of coffee beans are used. And those are not the best quality beans. Coffee

roasters usually use the best beans for regular coffee and the rest are used for decaf. One reason for this is that the decaffeination process removes certain disagreeable aftertastes.'

People sometimes find decaf less flavoursome. Understandably, says Fogliano. 'But the mediocre quality of decaffeinated coffee has nothing to do with the process of decaffeination, and everything to do with the quality of the beans. In itself, decaffeination actually improves the taste a little. But you can never make good coffee with poor quality beans.' But there is another advantage to taking the caffeine out of the beans: fungi that produce toxins can easily grow in coffee. 'If that happens, you have to throw away the coffee. Some manufacturers choose a different solution: they turn it into decaf. With the CO<sub>2</sub> you flush out not only the caffeine, but also the fungal toxins.' TL



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Vincenzo Fogliano,  
professor of Food Quality  
and Design

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