Coffee Acutely Increases Sympathetic Nerve Activity and Blood Pressure Independently of Caffeine Content
Role of Habitual Versus Nonhabitual Drinking

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Background—Coffee is the most abundantly consumed stimulant worldwide. However, its cardiovascular safety remains controversial. Possible health hazards have been related to its main ingredient, caffeine. Activation of the sympathetic nervous system by coffee may enhance cardiovascular risk; however, it is unclear whether this effect of coffee is related to caffeine or other substance(s) also contained in decaffeinated coffee.

Methods and Results—In 15 healthy volunteers (6 habitual and 9 nonhabitual coffee drinkers) arterial blood pressure (BP), heart rate, and muscle sympathetic nervous activity (MSA) were continuously recorded before and after drinking a triple espresso or a decaffeinated triple espresso or after intravenous administration of caffeine (250 mg) or placebo (saline) in the same subjects. There was a significant time × condition interaction for the intravenous caffeine and placebo conditions for MSA, with caffeine showing a significant increase in MSA at 60 minutes (53.2 ± 14.1% total activity) and the placebo group showing no effect. A similar significant time effect was found for coffee drinking (54.1 ± 22.5% total activity). Habitual and nonhabitual coffee drinkers demonstrated similar changes in MSA and BP after intravenous caffeine, whereas coffee drinking increased BP in nonhabitual drinkers only, despite comparable increases of MSA and plasma caffeine levels. Nonhabitual coffee drinkers showed similar activation of MSA and BP after caffeine infusion, coffee, or decaffeinated coffee.

Conclusions—Acutely, coffee and caffeine induced comparable increases in MSA and BP in nonhabitual coffee drinkers, whereas habitual coffee drinkers exhibited lack of BP increase despite MSA activation to coffee. Because decaffeinated coffee also increases BP and MSA in nonhabitual drinkers, ingredients other than caffeine must be responsible for cardiovascular activation. (Circulation. 2002;106:2935-2940.)

Key Words: hypertension ■ nervous system, sympathetic ■ coffee ■ caffeine

Coffee is one of the most popular beverages, consumed in a large amount all over the world. Although its taste is a factor, many consume it for its stimulant properties. Coffee drinking has been associated with increased cardiovascular morbidity and mortality in some but not all prospective and epidemiological studies. Interestingly, a beneficial effect of coffee was reported recently in the Scottish Heart Health study. Similarly, the role of coffee in the development of hypertension is also controversial, inasmuch as coffee drinking has been linked to both elevated blood pressure (BP) and has even been shown to have no effect on BP.

The sympathetic nerve system (SNS) plays an important role in the regulation of BP. Indeed, sympathetic overactivity is a well-established pathogenetic mechanism in hypertension. SNS reactivity is already enhanced in patients with borderline hypertension as well during mental stress in normotensive offspring of hypertensive parents, which suggests that intermittent activation of the SNS may in the long run lead to persistent increases in BP.

Coffee contains several hundred different substances, but its effects on hemodynamics and on the SNS have been mainly related to caffeine. Indeed, short-term administration of caffeine in non–coffee drinkers increases BP, plasma renin activity, and catecholamines. The direct effects of caffeine and coffee on SNS activity, however, still remain to be determined, particularly because decaffeinated coffee is considered to lack such cardiovascular effects. Thus, the aim of the present study was to assess the effects of caffeine, as well as regular and decaffeinated coffee, on sympathetic nerve activity and hemodynamics in humans in vivo.
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nonhabitual drinkers. A value of \( P < 0.05 \) was considered statistically significant.

**Results**

**Baseline Data**

At baseline resting BP, heart rate and MSA did not differ between the study groups (Table). BP averaged 126\(\pm3/69\pm1\) mm Hg; heart rate, 68\(\pm2\) bpm; and MSA, 44.7\(\pm1.8\) bursts/min and 13.5\(\pm1.6\) V/min.

In spite of coffee abstinence of at least 16 hours’ duration, caffeine was still detectable in habitual coffee drinkers (5.5\(\pm1.3\) \(\mu\text{mol/L}\)), and that level was significantly higher than in nonhabitual drinkers (1.9\(\pm1.6\) \(\mu\text{mol/L}\), \( P = 0.04 \)).

**Intravenous Administration of Caffeine**

Intravenous administration of caffeine (Figure 1) significantly increased circulating caffeine levels (Figure 1F). The pattern of increase had both significant linear (\( F_{1,9} = 50.8, \ P = 0.001 \)) and quadratic (\( F_{1,9} = 56.2, \ P = 0.001 \)) components. This increase was accompanied by a marked increase in sympathetic nerve activity (Figure 1A). A significant time by condition interaction was also obtained for total sympathetic nerve activity (\( F_{1,10} = 5.5, \ P = 0.04 \)). In fact, total sympathetic nerve activity (ACS) increased in the caffeine condition by 40.3\(\pm19\)% at 30 minutes and by 54.1\(\pm22.5\)% at 60 minutes, a significant linear trend (\( F_{1,6} = 17.8, \ P = 0.006 \)). In the placebo condition, there was no significant effect of time (\( F_{2,16} < 1 \)). For the remaining physiological parameters, the overall 3\(\times\)2 ANOVA did not yield significant time \(\times\) group interactions, although most of these tests were marginally significant. However, we view these results as reflecting our low level of statistical power to detect these ordinal interactions. Thus, we also tested the effect of time and its trend components separately for the caffeine and placebo conditions. With the exception of diastolic BP (\( F_{2,16} < 1 \)) we found a significant effect of time in the caffeine condition for burst count per minutes (\( F_{2,12} = 4.2, \ P = 0.041 \)), systolic BP (\( F_{2,16} = 8.7, \ P = 0.002 \)), and heart rate (\( F_{2,16} = 5.9, \ P = 0.012 \)). All of these changes reflect a linear increase or decrease, with the exception of heart rate, where we also obtain a significant
quadratic trend \((F_{1,8}=8.5, \ P=0.02)\). This quadratic trend is consistent with the immediate effect of caffeine on heart rate. There were no significant changes in the physiological parameters for the placebo condition.

The increase in burst count averaged \(5.5\pm3\%\) and \(9.4\pm4\%\) at 30 and 60 minutes. Systolic BP increased by \(3\pm1.6\) mm Hg and \(6.4\pm1.7\) mm Hg after 30 and 60 minutes, respectively (Figure 1B), and heart rate significantly decreased (by \(-7.1\pm2\) bpm at 30 minutes and \(-4.6\pm2\) bpm at 60 minutes) after intravenous administration of caffeine.

Furthermore, no difference in the course of BP, heart rate, or MSA was seen between habitual and nonhabitual coffee drinkers after receiving the same intravenous dose of caffeine.

**Coffee Drinking**

Sixty minutes after drinking a triple espresso, plasma caffeine concentrations reached the peak \((23.6\pm2.3\ \mu\text{mol/L})\) and were comparable to those achieved 45 minutes after intravenous caffeine \((27.0\pm1.8)\). Importantly, habitual and nonhabitual coffee drinkers showed identical increases in plasma caffeine concentration (Figure 2F).

We first analyzed the overall effect of coffee drinking without regard to the subjects’ status as habitual or nonhabitual coffee drinkers. Sympathetic nerve activity showed a sustained increase after coffee drinking. Total activity increased by \(29.3\pm9.6\%\) and \(53.2\pm14.1\%\) at 30 and 60 minutes. The percent increase in bursts per minute was \(7.2\pm4\%\) and \(11.8\pm4\%\), respectively. The magnitude of changes in MSA seen 60 minutes after coffee drinking was comparable to that after intravenous administration of caffeine.

A triple espresso increased—at 30 and 60 minutes, respectively—systolic BP by \(5\pm1.5\) mm Hg and \(7.5\pm2\) mm Hg and diastolic BP by \(6\pm1\) mm Hg and \(4\pm2\) mm Hg. Accordingly, heart rate decreased by \(4\pm1.5\) bpm at 30 minutes and \(2\pm2\) bpm at 60 minutes.

**Effects of Coffee Drinking According to Habitual Coffee Consumption**

In nonhabitual coffee drinkers, systolic BP increased markedly after coffee consumption \((12.6\pm1.6\ \text{mm Hg at 60 minutes}, t_c=7.8, \ P=0.001, \text{Figure 2C})\). In contrast, in habitual coffee drinkers, no significant change was observed \((2.3\pm1.6\ \text{mm Hg at 60 minutes}, t_c=1.4, \ P=0.227)\).

Elevation of diastolic BP was also more pronounced in nonhabitual drinkers (Figure 2D). At 60 minutes, diastolic BP was increased by \(7.1\pm1.6\ \text{mm Hg} (t_c=4.4, \ P=0.012)\, and for habitual drinkers, the change was not significant \((0.7\pm3.4\ \text{mm Hg}, t_c<1)\).
Even though there was a significant and linear time interaction for coffee in both the habitual and the nonhabitual group, we found a significant increase compared with baseline for the habitual coffee drinkers ($t_1=3.2, P=0.025$) but not for nonhabitual coffee drinkers ($t_1=1.9, P=0.147$). For heart rate (Figure 2E) or bursts per minute (Figure 2B), there were no significant changes for either habitual or nonhabitual coffee drinkers.

### Decaffeinated Coffee

In nonhabitual coffee drinkers, decaffeinated coffee did not increase plasma caffeine levels ($t_1=2.54, P=0.084$, Figure 2F). More interestingly, despite the absence of caffeine, systolic BP increased by 5.5±2.5 mm Hg at 30 minutes and by 12±3 mm Hg at 60 minutes ($t_1=3.8, P=0.033$, Figure 2C). Total sympathetic activity showed only a marginally significant increase at 60 minutes (22.1±12.3%, $t_1=2.1, P=0.128$, Figure 2A) compared with baseline. However, when we considered the complete trend across time by adding the data from 30 minutes, we found an overall effect for time on total sympathetic activity ($f_2,6=6.8, P=0.029$), which was primarily a significant linear trend ($f_1=21.2, P=0.019$). Diastolic BP (Figure 2D), heart rate, (Figure 2E) and number of bursts per minute (Figure 2B) did not show any changes after decaffeinated coffee.

### Discussion

Our data suggest that coffee and caffeine similarly increase MSA and BP in nonhabitual coffee drinkers, whereas habitual coffee drinkers show no BP response in spite of MSA activation. Moreover, decaffeinated coffee and caffeine resulted in a similar time by condition interaction for total sympathetic nerve activity, suggesting that substances other than caffeine may be responsible for the stimulating effect of coffee on the cardiovascular system. The fact that, in nonhabitual coffee drinkers, coffee and decaffeinated coffee similarly increased MSA and BP is intriguing and supports the hypothesis that substances other than caffeine are responsible for the cardiovascular effect of drinking coffee.

The present study demonstrates for the first time that caffeine activates the SNS, increases systolic and diastolic BP, and decreases heart rate, although coffee drinking caused an increase in SNS activity with concomitant elevation of BP in nonhabitual coffee drinkers only. Furthermore and surprisingly, nonhabitual coffee drinkers also exhibited similar cardiovascular responses after decaffeinated coffee.

Prospective and epidemiological studies yielded controversial results on the cardiovascular effects of coffee drinking. In fact, coffee drinking has been linked to both elevated and reduced BP and even to no effect on BP. The inconsistencies in the reported studies can partially be attributed to methodological defects and failure to control confounding variables, including baseline BP, smoking habits, sex differences, dietary and alcohol intake, stress, and obesity, as well as inaccurate determination of daily coffee and caffeine intake. It is likely that different distribution of coffee habits within these studies may, in accordance with our observations, account for some of the inconsistencies of the studies analyzing the hypertensive potential of coffee. In this context, studies showing acute increase in BP were conducted in nonhabitual drinkers or in habitual drinkers after a prolonged abstinence only.

In particular, the differential acute effects of caffeine and coffee on SNS have previously not been assessed in humans in vivo. The present study is the first that demonstrates an activation of the SNS by caffeine and coffee as well as decaffeinated coffee. The pressor effect of caffeine and coffee seen in nonhabitual coffee drinkers must be related to a central or possibly peripheral SNS activation. The fact that BP increased while heart rate decreased or remained unchanged suggests a differential stimulation of peripheral and cardiac sympathetic nerve activity by caffeine and coffee. Indeed, it is likely that the increase in BP induced a baroreceptor-mediated inhibition of cardiac sympathetic activity because it is seen after infusion of a vasopressor substance. Pressor effect of drinking water has been described in subjects who were encouraged to drink a large volume ($\approx500$ mL) as quickly as possible and was linked (even though not directly measured) to activation of the SNS. This effect may be in part due to bladder distention, known to activate SNS. Considering the small volume of espresso drunk in our study ($\approx30$ mL), this is less likely to happen.

So far, the cardiovascular stimulatory effects of coffee have been linked to sympathetic nerve activation by caffeine. Indeed, also in our study, intravenously applied caffeine did induce this expected response. However, we here provide evidence that in nonhabitual coffee drinkers, the cardiovascular activation by coffee is independent of caffeine content. In fact, decaffeinated coffee led to an increase in MSA and BP similar to that caused by caffeine-containing espresso, suggesting that substance(s) other than caffeine mediate sympathetic activation and the BP increase after coffee drinking. This interpretation is supported by other findings: The ingestion of a triple espresso did not cause any increase in BP in habitual coffee drinkers, probably because of induced tolerance. However, the differences in the BP changes between habitual and nonhabitual coffee drinkers were not related to a loss in sympathetic nerve activation by caffeine. To the contrary, intravenous caffeine evoked similar changes in sympathetic activity in both groups. Thus, tolerance to coffee also does not appear to be related to caffeine. A placebo effect in nonhabitual coffee drinkers cannot be excluded with certainty; however, the pattern changes over time, with a slow, progressive increase in BP and MSA, in line with the increase in circulating caffeine levels, which suggests a true pharmacological effect.

According to our results, the impact of habitual versus nonhabitual coffee drinking is so important that appropriate stratification of patients seems essential in analyzing any data in this field. In fact, most of the studies on the acute effect of caffeine or coffee reporting a pressor effect were performed in nonhabitual coffee drinkers or after a prolonged abstinence. The acute effect of coffee drinking in habitual coffee drinkers has never been documented, whereas epidemiological studies are mostly based on habitual coffee drinkers. Recently published epidemiological studies failed to demonstrate a clear association between increasing levels of coffee...
consumption and risk of cardiovascular morbidity or mortality, and even a beneficial effect has been postulated.

It is quite possible that the potential adverse effects previously adjudicated to coffee could be significantly less apparent when consumed regularly. Indeed, on the basis of our results—and epidemiological studies—it is likely that in normotensive individuals without a genetic background for hypertension, coffee drinking cannot be considered a risk factor for hypertension. Whether offspring of hypertensive parents react differently to coffee or caffeine—as they do to mental stress—remains to be investigated. Certainly, in habitual coffee drinkers, coffee restriction does not seem to be medically necessary. Identification of the ingredient(s) of coffee other than caffeine responsible for cardiovascular activation could lead to new forms of coffee truly lacking undesirable stimulants.

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