

A 'heathenish liquor'? A cure for cancer? The history of coffee is full of surprises

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. These countries are the top six coffee producers in the world. Put them in order from 1 (the top producer) to 6 (the lowest producer in this selection).

Honduras
Colombia
Ethiopia
Brazil
Vietnam
Indonesia

2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

abominable	beneficial	beverage	bowel	correlation
detrimental	drowsiness	forage	gaslight	leaflet
outlandish	proprietor	undoubted	win over	

1. Your _____ is the part of your body where solid waste is formed.
2. If something is _____, it has a good effect on someone or something.
3. However, if it is _____, it has a bad effect.
4. A(n) _____ is a drink.
5. When people _____, they search in a wide area for something, usually food.
6. A(n) _____ claim is extremely strange and unusual.
7. A(n) _____ is a small paper advertisement that you are given in the street.
8. A(n) _____ is someone who owns a business.
9. If you suffer from _____, you feel very sleepy.
10. To _____ means to persuade someone to agree with you.
11. If something is described as _____, it is extremely bad or offensive.
12. If you _____ someone or something, you criticise them or it severely in public.
13. A(n) _____ is a connection or relationship between two things that is not caused by chance.
14. If something is _____, everyone agrees that it is true.

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A new study suggests coffee could prevent bowel cancer recurring – but claims for its healing properties have abounded since the 15th century

Jonathan Morris

2 April, 2024

- 1 Last week, a study was published showing that people with bowel cancer who drink coffee – quite a lot of coffee, two to four cups a day – were less likely to suffer a return of the disease. Experts have said that if the results hold in further studies, coffee could be prescribed to cancer patients on the UK's National Health Service. That coffee does have an effect on human function is beyond dispute – but whether that impact is beneficial or detrimental has been the subject of contention since Sufi mystics began consuming the beverage sometime in the mid-15th century.
- 2 The indigenous peoples of the forests of southwest Ethiopia foraged berries from wild coffee plants that were shipped across the Red Sea to prepare the decoction known as qahwa, which Yemeni Sufis incorporated into their night-time religious ceremonies to reduce their desire for sleep. Once mainstream Islamic courts ruled coffee was not intoxicating, consumption became widespread among the Muslim populations in the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire.
- 3 Coffee was initially thought of as a sort of medicine. Turkish merchants brought coffee to Venice, where it was prescribed for disorders of the digestive system. It seems to have been made up into small potions and drunk cold. Europe's first coffee houses appeared in 1650s London, when Pasqua Rosée opened his premises serving merchants from the nearby Royal Exchange. By 1663, there were 82 coffee houses registered in the City of London, whose customers were attracted by the outlandish health benefits claimed for the new beverage.
- 4 According to a widely reproduced leaflet used by coffee house proprietors, the drink "fortifies the heart ... is very good to help digestion ... quickens the spirits and ... is good against sore eyes ... and against the headache".
- 5 Its most attractive feature, however, was that "it will prevent drowsiness and make one fit for business". The leaflet warns that people should not drink it after supper, "unless you intend to be watchful, for it will hinder sleep for three or four hours." For merchants living off their wits, conducting business over stimulating dishes of coffee was preferable to trying to maintain concentration while drinking the small beer sold in taverns. Despite the leaflet's warnings, many coffee houses remained open well into the evening to enable trading and networking to continue.
- 6 Not everyone was won over. The 1674 Women's Petition Against Coffee alleged that "excessive use of that newfangled, abominable, heathenish liquor called coffee" had made their husbands impotent and "as unfruitful as those desserts whence that unhappy Berry is said to be brought." The petition's call for men to resume drinking beer suggests the petition was probably produced by tavern proprietors rather than wives protesting against their husbands drinking coffee.
- 7 Negative advertising returned to the fore two centuries later in the US, when wellness entrepreneurs began attacking coffee as responsible for a newly fashionable scourge: nerves. The businessman CW Post turned denouncing coffee into an art form, enabling him to become a millionaire just seven years after starting a business manufacturing Postum, a roasted wheat-bran beverage, in 1895.
- 8 Post effectively gaslit coffee drinkers through his adverts' references to such conditions as coffee heart, coffee neuralgia and brain fog. One featured an overflowing cup and the text "constant dripping wears away the stone – perhaps a hole has been started in you. Try leaving off coffee for ten days and use Postum Food coffee." Ironically, Post was a secret coffee drinker, albeit a seemingly self-loathing one whose periods of abstinence alternated with spells of bingeing.

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- 9 Since the 1960s, mass longitudinal surveys of coffee drinkers have thrown up contradictory evidence of its impact. Early studies identified a strong negative correlation with overall health, probably because they failed to allow for associated lifestyle choices – most notably smoking. In 1991, the World Health Organization listed coffee as a possible cause of cancer, but in 2016, this status was reversed as more nuanced studies have shown a larger number of positive outcomes being associated with coffee drinking.
- 10 Caffeine's undoubted physiological and psychoactive qualities may influence some of these outcomes, but many may equally relate to the other hundreds of unique compounds contained in a single cup. The high quantities of soluble dietary fibre present within brewed coffee may contribute to bowel health, and coffee contains plenty of antioxidants associated with protection against ageing and dementia. Even a rogue court ruling in California in 2018 requiring roasters to put health warnings on roasted coffee as it contained the carcinogenic compound acrylamide was soon overturned by state officials on the grounds that the concentrations were so low it was virtually impossible that drinking coffee alone could result in cancer. Following centuries on the defensive, it may be time for coffee professionals to dust down those leaflets and follow the example of Pasqua Rosée.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. According to the article's author, what is 'beyond dispute'?
2. Where did coffee drinking first start?
3. Where and when did the first coffee houses in Europe appear?
4. What was coffee's most attractive feature, according to coffee-house owners?
5. What did the women's petition ask men to start doing again?
6. Why did CW Post criticise coffee?
7. What was the irony behind Post's attacks on coffee?
8. What was the probable reason early studies identified a strong correlation between coffee and negative health?
9. What may contribute to bowel health?
10. Why was the California court ruling overturned?

4 Key language

a. Use these prepositions to complete the phrases.

against beyond for on to with

1. prescribe _____ patients
2. prescribe _____ a particular medical condition
3. _____ dispute
4. protest _____ (something)
5. a correlation _____ (something)
6. _____ the defensive

b. Use some of the phrases from task A to complete the following sentences.

1. The fact that smoking is bad for you is _____. There are tons of evidence that support this.
2. Demonstrators filled the streets _____ the government's latest policies.

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3. The doctor _____ some vitamins _____ to my mother because she has been lacking energy lately.

4. The quantity and quality of one's sleep has a direct _____ _____ their health.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "I can't start the day without a cup of coffee."
- "Instant coffee is better than ground coffee."
- "The best place to drink coffee is at home."

6 In your own words

a. Do you drink coffee? Is this a common drink where you live? Go online and research information about the history of coffee or another popular drink in your country. Use the following questions to create an outline for your presentation:

- How was it first introduced to your country?
- How often is it drunk?
- Does it have any health benefits or drawbacks?
- Why is it so popular?

b. Present your findings to your class.