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Researchers now believe coffee may reduce risk of several cancers, Harvard expert tells group, reversing earlier, faulty epidemiology

New York, NY, Nov. 1 – A prominent epidemiologist and professor of neurology at Harvard Medical School said that, "The accumulating scientific evidence we have now suggests that coffee drinkers are at reduced risk of several cancers."

Dr. Alan Leviton spoke at a health and fitness symposium where scientists and experts presented new research and commented on the significance of findings previously published. He said research shows that people who drink coffee may be better protected against cancers of the colon and liver, and perhaps even against some types of breast cancer.

The epidemiologist said that at one time coffee drinkers were thought to be at heightened risk for a variety of different cancers. "Over the years," he said, "as improved studies were completed and reported, it became apparent that support for this negative view was evaporating."

In his talk today at New York's Reebok Sports Club, Dr. Leviton provided his perspective of how the field has evolved over the past quarter century. He described changes in the scientific view of coffee and disease, and offered reasons why they have occurred. To illustrate past problems, he cited examples from studies of pancreatic, bladder, colon, and breast cancers.

For example, it is now apparent that cigarette smokers metabolize caffeine more rapidly than do non-smokers. Dr. Leviton told the group, "Smoking does something to enhance the metabolism of caffeine, that's one reason smokers drink more coffee. It's not simply a social behavior, having a cigarette and a cup of coffee. Cigarette smokers can drink more coffee than non-smokers and still not feel any of the discomforts of too much caffeine." Thus smokers, who can actually drink twice as much caffeine, tend to drink more coffee than nonsmokers.

Dr. Leviton said that a reason for past negative views about coffee drinking and disease was caused by incomplete information supplied by persons taking part in coffee studies, as well as the unwillingness of respondents to admit to what many might consider unhealthy or unacceptable habits -- specifically smoking. "Since coffee is socially acceptable, people tend to be honest about it. But many of these people will not tell the truth about a socially undesirable behavior such as smoking. So when they participate in coffee-related studies they provide inadequate information about smoking -- but again, they are honest about their coffee drinking. The result is that coffee consumption invariably gets blamed for some of the smoking-related risks of such smoking-related diseases as bladder cancer."

According to the National Cancer Institute, "Cigarette smokers are two to three times more likely than nonsmokers to get bladder cancer." Cancer-causing chemicals in tobacco smoke are absorbed into the blood, filtered out by the kidneys and then, as a part of the urine, stored in the bladder. Over time, this appears to cause damage to the bladder lining. Coffee has nothing to do with

this process.

Dr. Leviton told the health editors, "The accumulating evidence we have now is that coffee drinkers are at reduced risk of several cancers, such as cancer of the colon and liver. In addition, some women might even be able to reduce their risk of breast cancer by drinking coffee."

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