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From: Dr. Atkinson

To: All of my patients...

Subj: The Urinary Problems of Caffeine

Caffeine is the single most abundant compound added to drinks in America, and is found in most cola, tea, coffee, energy and other associated drinks. It is included in tablet form, headache medications and innumerable other places. It is associated with improved mood, alertness, and fatigue reduction. In high doses it brings palpitations, jitters, sleeplessness and irritability. For my Urology patients it brings bladder problems. This last is the current topic.

It is very common for my patients to have concerns with sudden urgency, as in having to rush to the toilet before they think it is time. Sometimes it is just that time, but in the face of caffeine that time comes a lot sooner than it would otherwise. The bladder has the job of relaxing to hold the urine made by the kidneys. Caffeine blocks that relaxation, and the nerves in the bladder signal a need to empty with the bladder less full. Then once that signal of need arrives, caffeine causes the bladder to squeeze with a lot more force than it would without the caffeine. Chocolate does the same thing because it is chemically a very similar compound.

It is a double-whammy – more desire to empty with less in the bladder. So then after running to the toilet it seems like there is a weak stream, because the bladder isn't as full and the higher squeeze acting on a lower amount makes a difficult time.

A cup of coffee (8 oz) has about 95mg of caffeine. Tea has 54mg, but that is hot tea. A big glass of iced tea is about 120mg of caffeine. A cola has 34mg in a 12 oz can, but most people drink more than that. Diet cola has more at 46mg. Average consumption in America ranges from 110 to 260mg/day, depending on the source, and 85 to 90% of the US population drinks at least one caffeinated beverage a day. 75% of that use is in morning coffee.

If you are having trouble with overactive bladder, the initial targets to improve are reduction or elimination of caffeine, constipation management, less spicy foods, and timed voiding. Timed voiding is going to the bathroom by the clock, so that the bladder doesn't get too full before the sudden urgency comes on. But of these, caffeine is the biggest player. We shouldn't start an overactive bladder medicine when you take a medicine that causes it!

Best regards,

J. Dudley Atkinson IV, MD