Can Decaf Coffee Cause Cancer?

Advocacy groups petitioned the FDA to ban methylene chloride, a key chemical and known carcinogen used in the decaffeination process.

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A cup of decaffeinated coffee may keep jitters at bay, but some health advocacy groups are petitioning the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to ban a known cancer-causing chemical commonly used in the decaffeination process, CNN reports.

Methylene chloride is a chemical used in such industrial processes as paint remover manufacturing, and metal degreasing and cleaning. The colorless liquid can harm the eyes, skin, liver and heart. What's more, it may also cause cancer, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In fact, methylene chloride is recognized as a carcinogen by the National Institutes of Health's National Toxicology Program, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the World Health Organization.

The EPA banned the sale of the chemical as a paint stripper in 2019 and proposed a ban of its sale for other consumer uses and many industrial and commercial uses in 2023, Maria Doa, PhD, senior director of chemical policy for the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), told CNN.

EDF is one of five entities behind petitions sent to the FDA in November. The petitions argue that the FDA is not adhering to an as federal act titled the Delaney Clause, which requires the administration to ban food additives shown to cause cancer when consumed by humans or animals.

Currently, the FDA allows methylene chloride to be used as a solvent in decaf coffee if the residues of the chemical do not exceed "10 parts per million (0.001%) in decaffeinated roasted coffee and in decaffeinated soluble coffee extract (instant coffee)."

The nonprofit Clean Label Project, which seeks to bring transparency to food and consumer product labeling, tested 17 brands of coffee and detected methylene chloride in seven, including decaffeinated roasts by Green Mountain, Maxwell House, Peet's Coffee, Café Bustelo, Kroger and more. While chemical levels were low in most samples, one brand reached 8.9 parts per million, close to the FDA's limit of 10 parts per million.

While there isn't much conclusive research on the link between methylene chloride and cancer, Doa told CNN that the FDA's decision on the chemical's use for coffee "is decades old and clearly outdated."

Doa argues that the levels of methylene chloride found in decaf coffee may be generally low, but it is "completely unnecessary because safer processes for decaffeinating coffee are available and being used."

The FDA is currently reviewing the petitions; a final decision on the matter could potentially take years, according to CNN.

But don't confuse this decaf controversy with other stories touting the health benefits of regular (caffeinated) coffee. To read more, click #Coffee. There, you'll find headlines such as "Is coffee good or bad for you?" "Coffee May Improve Survival After Breast Cancer," "FDA Supports Exempting Coffee From California's Cancer Warning Law," "Coffee Consumption Linked to Lower Liver Fibrosis" and "Caffeine May Reduce Liver Metastasis in Colon Cancer."
