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Top Doctors: A Cup of Prevention

By Elaine Porterfield



(Photo by Keith Nagley)

Love that cup of joe, like any good Seattleite? You may soon have a reason to enjoy it for more than a nice little caffeine buzz.

Research by University of Washington dermatologist Dr. Paul Nghiem, which falls in the “almost too good to be true” category for coffee- and outdoor-loving Seattleites, has found that both ingesting coffee and using it topically may reduce the risk of skin cells becoming cancerous.

Even though his findings, published last year in *Cancer Research* and this year in the *Journal of Investigative Dermatology*, are currently limited to mice, it hasn't stopped Nghiem from becoming a bit of a media darling, with news outlets from Boston to Great Britain to the Middle East sharing the story. “I would say yes, I'm surprised by it,” says a somewhat bemused Nghiem of the attention his research has received.

Nghiem cautions that plenty of hopeful research has stalled between testing in mice and testing in humans. Nonetheless, the findings are promising enough for research to continue to move forward on several fronts. That includes the production of a skin cream with caffeine. Long-term health studies have shown decreased rates of skin cancer in people who regularly drink caffeinated beverages, Nghiem says.

“We're studying the effect of topical caffeine in mice that have a great sensitivity to skin cancer by sunlight,” he says. “These mice were created to mimic a rare condition called Xeroderma pigmentosum.” Children with this disease are so sensitive to the effects of sunlight they can only go outside at night. “If they go out at all [in sunlight], they have a high, high risk of skin cancer,” Nghiem says. “We want to test whether caffeine would protect mice with this exact same disease, and move toward human studies.”

Meanwhile, a collaborator at Rutgers University is conducting trials with healthy humans to see how the topical application of caffeine affects skin.

Nghiem's research began more than a decade ago, when he began studying what happens when sunlight hits and damages skin cells, and how those cells repair themselves, something he calls a “complicated and mysterious” reaction. “We started studying a protein that, 12 years ago, we thought would involve that response,” he says. “Within a few years of when we started, we found that caffeine can do many things in the body.”

Among caffeine's many physiological effects is to interrupt a protein called ATR-Chk1 in cells damaged by UV rays, causing the damaged cells to self-destruct. “It selectively kills cells that are on their way to becoming cancer,” he explains.

Nghiem himself doesn't mind the occasional cup of coffee, though he's more of a tea drinker. And he doesn't advise folks to go out and start drinking either if they don't do so already. But, he adds somewhat impishly, “If you already drink coffee or caffeinated beverages, it's another reason to enjoy.”

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