

*A REASON FOR JOINING THE TEA SET?

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Atherosclerosis—hardening of the arteries—is traditionally linked with the concentration of certain fatty elements (lipids) in the blood. Recently, several people have pointed out that drinking coffee raises the concentration of blood lipids, while tea drinking apparently slightly lowers the concentration. One obvious question is brought up by these findings: does coffee drinking increase the chance of atherosclerosis and tea drinking reduce it?

Certainly some epidemiological evidence hints at this; in 1963 it was reported that people who developed coronary thrombosis—the result of atherosclerosis of the coronary artery—drank more cups of coffee than those without the disease. And much earlier, in 1941, a book splendidly entitled '*Chinese lessons to western medicine*' pointed out that the occurrence of atherosclerosis among the Chinese, who drink tea almost exclusively, is very low. A group headed by Dr Wei Young, of the Biomedical Division of the Lawrence Radiation Laboratory, Livermore, California, decided to look into the relationship in more details.

Data collected by this group over several years certainly indicates that the coffee-drinking population of the United States has a higher degree of atherosclerosis than the tea-drinking Chinese. There is always the possibility that some unknown racial trait could figure in these results, of course, so to put the investigation on a firmer, laboratory-controlled footing, Young and his colleagues investigated the effects of including tea in the diet of rabbits. They found that the degree of atherosclerosis in rabbits fed on a fatty diet plus tea was very much lower than in a group fed on the same food plus water (Young, Hotovec & Romero 1967).

Further, their experiments showed that if atherosclerosis proceeds beyond a critical stage, tea drinking cannot reverse it. The best way of preventing atherosclerosis appears to be by drinking tea either with, or immediately after, a fatty meal. The actual constituent of tea that has these wondrous properties has so far eluded Young and his co-workers; however, their work will no doubt do more to boost the tea industry than even the effects of the mythical swinging Tea Set.

Reference

YOUNG, W., HOTOVEC, R. L. & ROMERO, A. G. (1967). Tea and atherosclerosis. *Nature, Lond.* 216, 1015.

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