

Opinions of Ottoman physicians on the effect of coffee as a medicine

Editorial Article

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Coffee, which ranks first in the world as a beverage, is a medicinal plant with important effects. As it is known, coffee is the fruit seed of a tree from the *Coffea* genus of the Rubiaceae family, which grows in tropical hot climates.

The emergence of coffee worldwide and its use by the masses began in Yemen in the 1450s. Common ideas of historians who study the history of coffee based on the documents of that time; Coffee was known by religious Sufi groups in Yemen since the 15th century and was drunk due to its “stimulating” effect. In addition, when it was realized that it gave lightness and vigor to the body and eliminated lethargy and laziness, it became frequently consumed in Hejaz, Egypt, and Damascus in twenty years.

The Ottoman Empire ruled these geographies at that time. Those who went on pilgrimage brought the coffee in these lands to Ottoman cities and made them popular. Due to demand, coffee was brought to Istanbul by ships and sold by merchants. In the 1555s, two coffeehouses were opened in Tahtakale, Istanbul, and as their customers increased, many coffeehouses were established in other neighborhoods.

Europe became familiar with coffee from the Ottomans in the 17th century. The first coffeehouse was opened in Venice in 1615, and soon coffeehouses were opened in Marseille, London, Vienna and Paris, and coffee became a sought-after beverage in a short time.

When coffee began to be loved and consumed widely by the Ottomans, questions began to be asked whether this new drink was harmful to the body and, if so, what it was. Of course, the doctors of the time had to answer these questions.

Since coffee was a new drink, there was no information in the medical books of the time. Ömer Eş-Şâzelî, one of the Islamic physicians, stated that it is a cure for every ailment, like Zamzam, and that it works for whatever purpose it is consumed, in

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1418. Although Şihabeddin et-Tanbedavi said that coffee has no intoxicating properties, it has relaxing and reinforcing properties; Ottoman physicians had to say the last word.

The most comprehensive report on this subject was written by al-Kusuni, the chief physician of Suleiman the Magnificent, in 1566; "I have not found any information about coffee in any of the medical books I have read or seen. What I will say now is based on my own experience". He and other physicians summarized the benefits of coffee as follows; its biggest benefit is that it is stimulant, promotes vigor and comfort to the body, relieves anxiety, and please the heart. Due to its drying effect, it dries the moisture in the body, such as cold and sputum, and removes excess moisture from the stomach. It treats diseases caused by excess blood and sputum fluids. It prevents excess fluid accumulated in the body from going bad, dries it, strengthens the stomach, and increases urination. It releases the intestinal gases, prevents vomiting, moderates the temperament, increases blood flow, increases appetite and facilitates digestion.

But one thing that was well known was not to overdo it in drinking coffee. Ottoman physicians drew attention to two things; Do not roast the coffee too much and drink the appropriate amount.

Ottoman physicians wrote that coffee had also harmful effects due to its medicinal properties and this problem could be solved with some precautions, in their medical books. According to the medical rules of the time, each medicinal plant had "hot, cold, dry, moist" properties, and its harmful effects were corrected by balancing its dominant feature with its opposite. On this basis, coffee had a "cold and dry" feature. For this reason, some measures had to be taken to balance this effect.

They reported that the "dry" feature of coffee could be balanced with a glass of water, and the "cold" feature could be balanced by eating a piece of sugary food with it. This situation was explained in medical books as follows; A person who wants to drink coffee should either eat dessert before or along with it, and add sugar or honey in it. A person who wants to drink coffee to feel fit, to get rid of laziness and for the other benefits mentioned earlier, should eat plenty of desserts and drink peanut oil or liquid oil. Thus, offering sugar and Turkish delight along with coffee became in line with the doctors' regulations.

In response to a question about whether it is healthy to drink coffee immediately after a meal, chief physician Bedreddin el-Kûsûnî said that anything drunk during a meal disrupts the digestion of the food, and the best time to drink coffee is when the meal is complete and digestion begins.

This information functioned as rules followed by Ottoman society. Serving Turkish coffee with a glass of water and a piece of sugar, especially Turkish delight, became a tradition which shaped by the directives of Ottoman physicians. This tradition continues to this day.