

Scientists Espresso Their Glee over Caffeine Study

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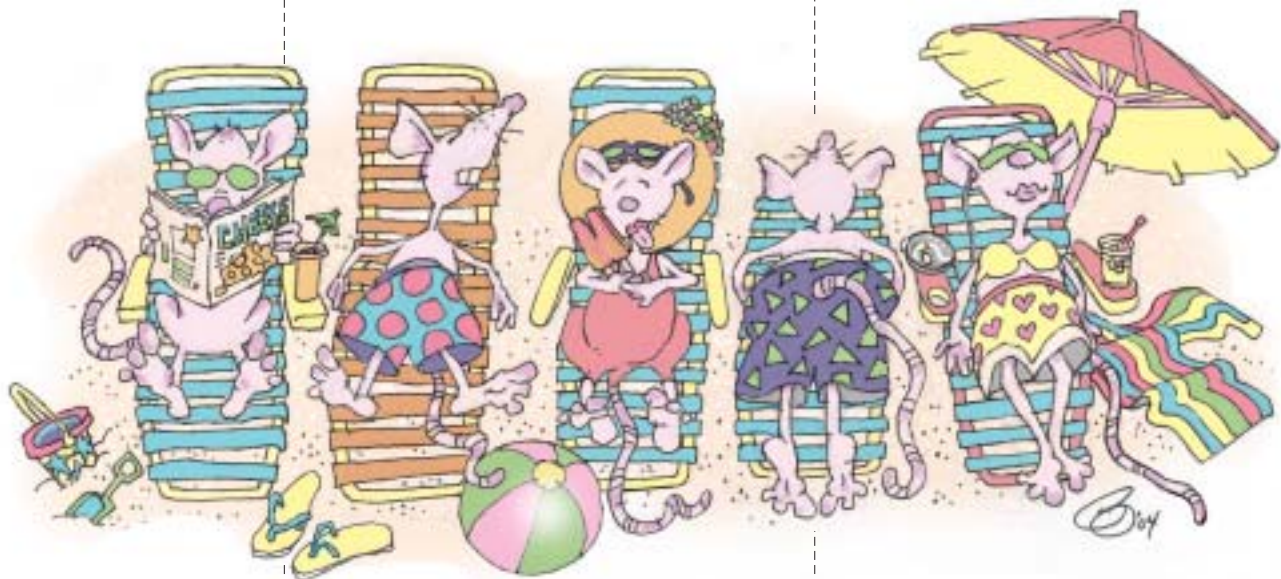
e'd like you to meet Dr. Allen Conney, professor of cancer and leukemia research at Rutgers University in Brunswick, New Jersey. He's over on Easton Avenue at the local Starbucks having a mocha frappuccino grande at the moment. "How much caffeine is in this stuff?" he asked the server. The kid doesn't know. "You have any mice here?" the professor persisted. "Well, we got one mouse that's over by the computer," the kid smirks with a typical teenage wise mouth. It's a dead end.

Back to the lab. Conney is onto something, but he's not going to get much help from Starbucks. Instead, it may be coming from Dr. Darrell Rigell over at New York University. Rigell is a professor of dermatology there and is, in fact, spokesman for the American Academy of Dermatology. Dr. Rigell doesn't have any mice either, but he knows where he can get some. And mice are

what these professors need. In fact, mice are in so much demand for medical research, we could do science a big favor if we all went out and rounded up all the mice we could find and airlift them in suitable containers with bits of sharp cheddar for in-flight snacks directly to Rutgers University. There are some important things happening there having to do with skin cancer and it involves mice and caffeine.

Ordinarily, your average mouse doesn't care a lot for caffeinated drinks, fancying instead 2 percent milk right out of the carton, or maybe a sip or two of hot chocolate if the weather's nippy. But that's beside the point. The point being that Drs. Conney and Rigell are hot on the discovery that caffeine, the chemical stimulant in coffee and tea, has been found to lower the risk of skin cancer in laboratory mice.

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You'd think the mice would be grateful for this advance in medical science, but the truth is that there has never been a reported case of skin cancer in mice that were left to their own resources. So it's the same old story with this twist: the mice have to be hairless in these experiments. A normal mouse is no beast of great beauty compared, say, to a Thompson's gazelle, but a hairless mouse is just pathetic. We suspect the only way the researchers are able to con 90 mice into participating in their big experiment is to promise them hair transplants after it is over. From past experience, this pledge carries the same weight as promising prisoners of war a shave, haircut and a Grand Slam breakfast at Denny's.

Rigell said that although hairless mice are commonly used for such research, "there is really no good animal model for skin cancer. The hairless mouse is the best of a bunch of bad choices." Very tactful, Doctor. You can imagine how the mice must feel, bald as billiard balls and now this. The fact is, Rigell confessed, "a lot of things that work in mice cannot be extrapolated to humans."

Conney said he doesn't care, the results of his work show that after exposing 90 mice to high levels of ultraviolet radiation twice a day for 20 days, he got some encouraging results. They uniformly got nice tans without any annoying white bra patterns. Next, some of the mice who were fruitlessly

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demanding applications of Solarcaine, got smeared with a solution of acetone and caffeine. Another group got lathered with acetone and EGCG (a chemical compound found in green tea) and the third bunch got acetone only. It has been reported that acetone, the stuff nail polish remover is made of, is soothing on the order of a cat o' nine tails.

After 18 weeks of this treatment during which the mice weren't allowed one phone call, let alone Miranda-ized, they were all killed. That's right — put 'em all down. Thanks, guys, you were great! The results of the experiment were considered a resounding success in terms of a 100 percent death rate — no, wait — the mice that received the caffeine all got malignant skin tumors and so did all the others.

So far so good, but the caffeinated mice, wired to the whiskers on the stuff, received 72 percent fewer tumors per mouse. Those receiving the EGCG got 66 percent less than the poor devils that only got acetone. The wrap party was attended by members of the immediate families.

So what? Well, Drs. Conney and Rigell agree that there is a need for a "morning-after" treatment for skin cancer, a therapy that would reduce cancer risk after excessive sun exposure. Conney added, "This is not a sun-screening effect, it is a biological effect."

So that these 90 little cue ball mice will not have died in vain, we need volunteers for some massive doses of ultra-

violet light such as can be found on any summer weekend on Florida and California beaches. For the most part these sol aficionados are essentially hairless and have comparable intelligence levels. Give them an unlimited expense account at Starbucks and let's see what happens after 18 weeks. **CDA**