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COULD IT GET ANY Sweeter!

THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT CHOCOLATE

By Carrie Wattu



Chocolate just got sweeter ladies, with the news that eating our favorite dessert (or let's be honest, breakfast) may actually be good for us. "Consuming chocolate in moderation is a natural part of the diet, makes us feel good, and offers some health benefits to you," confirms Gisele LeBlanc, MS, RD, LDN, CNSD, Clinical Nutrition Manager at UMass Memorial Medical Center in Worcester.

But hold on. Before you reach for a gooey, cream-filled milk chocolate bar, keep in mind that not all chocolate is created equally. As chocolate is processed (roasted and alkalized) into the candy we love to eat, it loses much of its flavonoids.

"Flavonoids," LeBlanc explains, "are substances found in chocolate that can function as natural antioxidants (compounds that protect the body from free radicals which accelerate the aging process and aggravate diseases). Similar amounts are also found in black tea, red wine, raisins, strawberries, pinto beans, and other plant products." Choose Chocolate High in Flavonoids

The chocolate richest in flavonoids is cocoa, the least-processed form of chocolate. Cocoa is basically chocolate without the fat added. For best results, look for cocoa that is not processed with alkali (ie. "Dutch" cocoa).

Another good choice is dark, semisweet, or bittersweet chocolate. It has two to four times the amount of flavonoids that milk chocolate has. The best varieties tend to be expensive and should only have a few ingredients on the label. According to *Prevention Magazine*, ounce for ounce, dark chocolate has five times as many antioxidants as blueberries.

For a healthy serving of chocolate, reach for a cup of cocoa, fruit dipped in dark chocolate, chocolate covered almonds, or a high-quality piece of dark chocolate instead of milk chocolate. Milk chocolate is high in fat and sugar and low in flavonoids.



“ Chocolate does contain moodenhancing chemicals including phenylethylamine, tryptophan, and theobromine; this could explain the mood-altering some women report after eating chocolate during the premenstrual period. Registered dietician and Certified Personal Trainer, Jessica Maillet, Leominster, afeteforfood.com “

And forget about white chocolate. It contains no real chocolate at all, just cocoa fat, sugar, and flavorings.

A Delicacy with Benefits

“Eating chocolate occasionally, and not regularly, helps to maximize health benefits,” explains LeBlanc. A 1998 Harvard University study found low mortality rates when a person ate candy one to three times per month. Eating chocolate more often had less benefit, and those who avoided chocolate overall had the highest mortality rate.



“ To keep portions reasonable, try chocolate dipped fruit, add mini semi-sweet chips to your favorite whole grain pancake, bread, or oatmeal recipe (small chips spread out better allowing you to use less) or purchase small dark-chocolate wrapped candies. Keeping chocolate in the house, but out of sight works best in my home. We store dark chocolate with almonds in the freezer. When I really want a piece, it can be found! Nutritionist Kate Scarlata, Boston, beegoodbeehappy.com “

In moderation, chocolate can help improve your health in the following ways:

- **Lowers Cholesterol**

Studies show that stearic acid, the main saturated fatty acid in chocolate, does not raise blood cholesterol levels as other saturated fats do. The flavonols, types of flavonoids, in chocolate help to lower levels of “bad” LDL cholesterol while boosting “good” HDL cholesterol.

- **Keeps Blood from Clotting**

Flavonoids make blood platelets less likely to clump and cause clots. Carl Keen, chairman of the nutrition department at the University of California-Davis, compared the reactions of platelets to a flavanol-rich cocoa drink and a blood-thinning dose of aspirin, and found similar reactions in a group of 20- to 40-year-olds.

- **Acts as an Immune Enhancer**

LeBlanc explains, “Some studies suggest that high intakes of chocolate are associated with increased immune function as well as lower risk of heart disease and stroke.

Flavonols may also affect the immune system by reducing inflammation. They have also been shown to help activate T-cells.”

- **Decreases the risk of stroke and heart disease**

“Since the flavonols in chocolate reduce inflammation, it can help in the lining of the artery walls as part of the process leading to cardiovascular disease,” says LeBlanc.

- **Lowers Blood Pressure**

Chocolate researcher, Dr. Norman Hollenberg of Brigham and Women’s Hospital, reported that flavanols may be associated with a chemical that regulates the arteries, nitric oxide, and lowers blood pressure. Leblanc points out that several studies have now confirmed the blood pressure-lowering capacity of flavanol-rich cocoa. The question that remains is the appropriate dose before cocoa products can be recommended as a treatment option in hypertension.

- **Decreases Cancer Risk (lung, thyroid, breast)**

In April 2005, *Molecular Cancer Therapy Journal* published a study citing that flavonoids from chocolate stopped the growth of and killed breast cancer cells. In fact, says Leblanc, due to their high concentration of catechins and procyanidins (bioactive compounds with distinct properties), cocoa and chocolate products may have beneficial health effects against oxidative stress and chronic inflammation, which are risk factors for cancer.

Chocolate Tasting Party

In the spirit of Valentine's Day, serve a decadent dose of chocolate to your friends and toast to your health.

Like coffee and wine, cacao beans from different parts of the world have unique flavors. Eating dark chocolate can be a bit of an acquired taste, so hold a tasting and experiment with the diverse flavors of fine dark chocolates which can range from "nutty," "cherry," "smoky," "earthy," and "spicy."

Dr. Steven Pratt, co-author of the 2004 best seller *SuperFoods Rx*, tested six brands of dark chocolate for high levels of flavonoids to determine a winner: Newman's Own Sweet Dark Chocolate (It's also organic). However, *Eating Well* magazine's taste test rated Newman's in addition to Hershey's Special Dark, and Ghiradelli's Dark Chocolate as undesirable. Their winners include Lindt Dark Chocolate and Scharffen Berger.

You decide. Pour some red wine, which is also high in antioxidants, but skip the glass of milk. Studies show that drinking milk may interfere with the absorption of antioxidants from chocolate and thwart the potential health benefits.

To your health!

Carrie Wattu is editor of baystateparent. She takes her chocolate with peanut butter and nuts. She has slowly acquired a taste for dark chocolate.