

CHOCOLATE

“Food of the Gods”

Chocolate comes from the beans of the cacao plant (*Theobroma cacao*, literally “food of the gods”). It has been used for centuries in Mayan and Aztec cultures for culinary, ceremonial, economic (beans were often used as currency), and medicinal purposes. Chocolate was purported to restore vitality, calm and soothe the “over-stimulated,” promote healthy digestion and kidney function, and support virility and longevity.

Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortez was introduced to “xocolatl” by Montezuma, the ruler of the Aztecs, who reportedly drank 50 cups of a bitter, chili-flavored chocolate drink daily. Cortez, who brought chocolate to Europe in the early 1500s, described it as, “The divine drink, which builds up resistance and fights fatigue. A cup of this precious drink permits a man to walk for a whole day without food.”

Although chocolate is now considered to be more junk food than health food, recent research may restore it to its former glory. Scientists have discovered that cocoa liquor, the creamy paste of ground, roasted cacao beans used to make chocolate, is nature’s richest source of polyphenols, a class of phytonutrients with potent antioxidant activity and other therapeutic effects.

Yes, chocolate has fat and calories — and it tastes way too good to be good for you — but the health benefits of [dark chocolate](#) cannot be denied. Here are four reasons you should add it to your diet.

1. Supports Normal Blood Pressure

One of cocoa’s most abundant polyphenols is flavanol, which stimulates the production of nitric oxide (NO). Readers of [Health & Healing](#) know that NO is a very important signaling molecule. When it is produced in the arteries, it acts as a vasodilator, relaxing the arteries and causing them to dilate, thus supporting normal blood pressure.

2. Helps Promote Normal Insulin Response

In March 2005, Italian researchers published results of a study reiterating that dark chocolate had positive effects on promoting normal blood pressure. In addition, they found that dark chocolate also supported a normal insulin response. Now, I know many of you are thinking that sugar-laden chocolate is the last thing people who are minding their blood sugars need to be eating. Yet this study suggests that dark chocolate may actually have a positive effect on glucose levels.

3. Supports Healthy Heart Function

Dark chocolate is full of potent free-radical fighting antioxidants. It also has the highest oxygen radical absorbance capacity (ORAC) of any food. According to this measurement of foods’ antioxidant strength, at 13,120, dark chocolate stands head and shoulders above other high-ORAC foods such as milk chocolate (6,740), raisins (2,830), blueberries (2,400), spinach (1,260), broccoli (890), and red grapes (739).

Dark chocolate also helps support normal cholesterol levels. Although its hefty saturated fat content may give one pause, most of that fat is stearic acid, which, unlike other saturated fats, has no adverse effects on cholesterol levels.

The role of dark chocolate in supporting heart health is so significant that it was recently named one of the seven heart-healthiest foods, along with wine, fish, fruits, vegetables, garlic, and almonds.

4. Makes You Feel Good

There’s something about chocolate that goes beyond satisfying your sweet tooth or hunger pangs. Maybe it’s the smooth, creamy “mouth-feel” we find so comforting. It might be an emotional connection to all those chocolate Easter bunnies and special treats from our childhood. Or it could be chocolate’s tryptophan and phenylethylamine, both of which support increased levels of the neurotransmitters

associated with sensations of pleasure. There is even research to suggest that compounds in chocolate stimulate the same "feel-good" receptors as falling in love. (No wonder chocolate and Valentine's Day are inseparable!)

For whatever reason, most people like chocolate, and some of us crave it like nothing else. An unknown chocoholic once said, "There are four basic food groups: milk chocolate, dark chocolate, white chocolate, and chocolate truffles." However, if you want to reap the health benefits discussed in this email, stick with dark chocolate.

Look for bars that contain 70 percent cocoa or more. Don't be put off by the fat content, and expect it to have some sugar. Unsweetened dark chocolate is extremely bitter, and even sweetened, it is an acquired taste for some, so shop around for a brand you like. Aim for no more than 50 g (1.75 ounces), or half of a large bar, daily. To keep caloric intake steady, eat in place of, rather than in addition to, other foods or snacks.

Have a happy and healthy day,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julian Whitaker, MD". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dr Julian Whitaker, MD

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