

## A Little Chocolate is good for your Health

February is American Heart Month and is a month often celebrated with chocolate. The good news for people who love chocolate is that studies continue to show a link between chocolate and heart health. Several study reviews concluded that eating dark chocolate lowers the risk of heart disease.

Compounds in cocoa beans called alkaloids, theobromines and antioxidant flavonoids are responsible for chocolate's health benefits. These heart health compounds are the same ones found in red wine, grape juice and tea. They have anti-inflammatory properties which provide protection against blood clots, improve cholesterol levels and help relax blood vessels, potentially lowering blood pressure.

But all chocolate is not equally beneficial. Some companies remove all or some of these compounds because they taste bitter. The theobromine also is a cardio-stimulant, while the level of this compound in dark chocolates is safe for humans to consume, it is toxic to animals.

Cocoa beans are initially fermented to develop the familiar chocolate flavor and aroma. After fermentation, the beans are roasted and crushed to a paste. Ingredients such as milk, vanilla, sugar and cocoa butter are added to produce chocolate. A popular food trend is to carefully select cocoa beans and add unique flavors such as chilies, herbs and sea salt.

If you love the taste but also want the health benefits of chocolate here are some choices of what you want to look for on labels.

- **Cocoa or cacao** is expressed as a percentage on labels and refers to the total amount of cocoa butter, chocolate liquor and cocoa powder.
- **Chocolate liquor** is not a liquid and is not alcohol. It is ground bean nibs and may be listed as unsweetened cocoa.
- **Cocoa butter** is naturally present and is responsible for the melt-in-your mouth quality of some chocolates. The word butter in its name is not a dairy component, but cocoa butter is fat from the cocoa bean.
- **White chocolate** is the blend of cocoa butter, sugar and flavoring. It doesn't contribute to known health benefits and is not labeled as "chocolate" by the Food and Drug Administration since it contains no cocoa solids.
- **Unsweetened baking chocolate** is 100 percent cocoa without added sugar. It is too bitter for eating.
- **Dark chocolate** contains various amounts of cocoa solids plus cocoa butter, sugar and other flavors. Bittersweet **chocolate** typically contains less sugar than semi-sweet chocolate. The amount of sugar varies among brands
- **Milk Chocolate** is a combination of chocolate liquor, cocoa butter, sugar and flavoring plus milk solids.

Like many treats, chocolate should be enjoyed in moderations. Some suggest limiting chocolate to an ounce or two a day. Use these guidelines to make heart healthy choices.

- **Dark Chocolate** has the most health benefits. The darker the chocolate, shown by a higher percent of cocoa solids, the lower the sugar content and the higher the antioxidant content. Look for flavonoid content on the label by percent cocoa.
- **Dutch processed cocoa** has a milk chocolate flavor. It has been neutralized to lower the acidity found in chocolate, but this also destroys the healthy antioxidants. Naturally unprocessed cocoa is a healthier choice.
- Some suggest that milk added to chocolate prevents the body from absorbing beneficial flavonoids.

If you indulge in eating chocolate, swap extra calories from soda and other calorie laden snacks. Though research shows that dark chocolate's benefits, it can't make up for unhealthy eating habits. Choose wisely and you could help your heart; then savor every bite.