

On Nutrition: by Helayne Waldman, Ed.D., N.E.

Chocolate is for Lovers and Octogenarians

It's almost Valentine's Day, and millions of American women are looking forward to the smoothest textured, the most seductively sweet and unashamedly romantic gift of all: a box of heart-stopping chocolates.

But lest you think that chocolate is one of those phenomena that's quintessentially American, consider the fact that the Aztec and Mayans cultivated "theobroma cacao" for centuries before the arrival of the Europeans. Theobroma cacao" translates literally as "food of the gods." In fact, the Mayans used this heavenly treat as currency (according to a 16th Century Spanish source, a Mayan mule once cost 60 cacao beans), and when the Europeans brought it home, it quickly became the favorite of the royal courts of Europe. Civilizations from Brazil to Belarus have hailed chocolate as an aphrodisiac, and the U.S. government officially lauded it in World War II by making it standard issue for the military. Today, more and more studies are validating that our cocoa-consuming predecessors were certainly on to something big.

To start, we women have always been sweet on the stuff because it elevates mood and associates us with feelings of love and comfort. But there's much more to the story for both women and men alike.

Review, for example, chocolate's impressive cast of flavonoids. Flavonoids are chemical compounds with antioxidant properties that plants use to protect themselves from environmental toxins. When we eat the plants that contain these chemicals, we too reap the benefits.



Scientists have recently discovered a particular type of powerful flavanoid in chocolate, called epicatechin. In chocolate, primarily the dark variety, flavanoids are plentiful, and provide a powerful cardiovascular boost. In addition to quenching free radicals, those destructive metabolic byproducts that can wreak havoc on our blood vessels along with every other organ, the specific flavanoids in chocolate, like those in red wine, have also been found to:

- Decrease "bad" LDL cholesterol
- Raise "good" HDL cholesterol
- Reduce the tendency of the blood to form dangerous clots
- Relax the blood vessels which inhibit an enzyme that causes inflammation, a major cause of heart disease

If you're worried about the high fat content of the chocolate, your concerns are both valid and unfounded. True, the bar, with a 50 percent fat content is high in calories, and like anything sweet and fatty, should clearly be eaten in moderation. The cocoa butter fat in chocolate, however, is by and large of the "good guy" variety. Oleic acid, for example,

is the healthy monounsaturated fat for which olive oil is feted.. And the evidence is stacking up that the stearic acid in cocoa butter, although a saturated fat, is in fact responsible for raising those protective HDLs.

Got a cough this Valentine's Day? Don't worry, a recent study found that theobromine, a derivative in cocoa, was nearly a third more effective than codeine in suppressing the common cough, due to its inhibition of the cranial nerve responsible for coughing.

And if that weren't enough, it even appears that dark chocolate has an impact on longevity, when eaten regularly in moderation. Indeed, no less august an institution than Harvard postulated, in a public health study, that chocolate-eating added nearly a year to men's lives, after accounting for weight, smoking status and other factors.

Not bad for a candy bar, eh? Remember, however, it's only the dark chocolate that has been shown to have this powerful effect. So make sure it's of exceptional quality, with at least 70 percent cocoa content, and if at all possible, organic. After all, you want only the best when it comes to guarding your health AND romancing your sweetheart.

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