

Finally... A Reason to Eat Chocolate

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When I went back to school to become a registered dietitian, my mother had one plea: "Please, find some reason why I should be eating more chocolate!"

Well, Mom, this may be your lucky day.

Chocolate has long been revered for its rich flavor and purported aphrodisiac qualities. The Aztecs believed that chocolate was a gift from the gods. The early Spanish explorers introduced chocolate to Europe in 1520, where it quickly became reserved for the nobility. Today, the hedonic appeal of chocolate (including its fat and sugar content, texture and aroma) makes it the most commonly craved food in North America by a large margin. (Source: Bruinsma K, "Chocolate, Food or Drug?" Journal of the American Dietetic Association, 1999;99:1249-1256).

For years dietitians have been wagging a finger at chocolate, warning that it is too high in fat, sugar and calories to be eaten, at best, no more than a few times a year. Yet although chocolate is calorically dense and rich in fat, it may not be the bugaboo that we once thought.

According to a report in Today's Dietitian, chocolate may contain compounds which support cardiovascular health. In a recent study, subjects who consumed a cocoa beverage experienced lower levels of platelet aggregation after 6 hours, while the controls (those who didn't get to drink the beverage) experienced no change. This is good news because high levels of platelet activity are thought to play a role in the progression of heart disease. (Source: "Eating Chocolate May be Good For Your Heart", Today's Dietitian, 2000; 2:10).

In addition to promoting heart health, good quality dark chocolate has been shown to contain phytochemicals. Researchers at the University of Buenos Aires found that subjects' blood showed an increase in antioxidant capacity just two hours after eating chocolate. Phytochemicals are biologically active compounds that neutralize damaging free radicals and may be protective against many diseases. While fruits, vegetables, soy and green tea have been linked to phytochemicals for years, only recently has chocolate entered into the limelight.

So what does this mean for chocolate lovers? Although you should by no means swap the "Apple a Day" for a Hershey bar, eating small pieces of good quality dark chocolate as an occasional treat may not be so bad for your heart after all. Dark chocolate contains cocoa butter, which can help improve your cholesterol profile (as research indicates that the body processes cocoa butter in a similar manner to olive oil).



In order to reap the health benefits of this delicious treat, be sure to choose good quality dark chocolate. Cheaper products often replace cocoa butter with highly saturated fats such as palm oil, which can contribute to clogged arteries. Milk chocolate is another poor choice, as it contains butterfat, which moves cholesterol levels in the wrong direction.

Remember that even top-shelf dark chocolate is still a rich food, and needs to be a balanced part of your overall diet. If you decide to indulge in chocolate more frequently, balance it with other foods that are lower in total calories and fat. Make sure that you are taking other steps to promote heart health as well, such as eating a diet rich in whole grains, fruits and vegetables, and that is low in saturated fat. Not only will it help you to live longer, it will also make Mom proud.