



Health by Chocolate

Chocolate is one of the world's favorite flavors and throughout history, chocolate has been considered a precious commodity. The botanical name for chocolate – *Theobroma cacao*, means “food of the Gods” in Ancient Greek. In the Aztec culture, only the elite drank chocolate, it was typically served at the end of special banquets. At one point in time the Aztecs and the Mayans even used the cocoa bean as currency! Casanova, the famed romancer, was known as one of the first to use the chocolate drink as an aphrodisiac. In the 1680's, in Martinique, chocolate was such a part of the culture that it was used for time - so, arriving at 'chocolate' was arriving at 8 o'clock. And in 2011 global chocolate sales totaled \$18.6 billion (according to Mintel) and is now even honored by International Chocolate Day on September 13th. But can we dare think something so delicious can actually provide health benefits.

Chocolate has made such a lasting cultural impact across many continents that scientists have been investigating what it is about chocolate that makes it so desired. And what they are finding suggests that chocolate may not only be an indulgence but may actually be good for you!

The Chocolate Crave

Why do we so desire chocolate in the first place? Why is it so delicious and even addicting? One theory suggests that when chocolate is eaten, the brain releases b-endorphin - “the feel good molecule” - and that this is the driving force behind the blissful effects. Research has identified more than 300 molecules that may have mood altering affects in chocolate. Some of the chemicals found in high amounts in chocolate include, phenylethylamine, serotonin, theobroma, and cannabinoid-like substances. Phenylethylamine is a natural chemical produced by the brain and is triggered by such things as looking into the eyes of a significant other... or having a bit of chocolate. An increase of this “love molecule” causes a quickened heartbeat and sweaty palms, and a feeling of euphoria. Another substance found in chocolate, mimics marijuana, and attaches to the same receptors in the brain- this produces feelings of decreased pain and slowed movements. The combination of these molecules found in chocolate work together to create a temporary feeling of well being and happiness.

Perhaps people crave chocolate because it makes them feel good, like falling in love...

Science Says...

Chocolate lovers rejoice...Recent studies have revealed benefits in balancing blood sugar, improving artery and vein integrity, and decreasing risk of heart disease.

A daily dose of dark chocolate was found to reduce the risk of death from heart attack by almost 50% in some cases. Researchers at the John Hopkins University School of Medicine found that blood platelets clotted more slowly in people who had eaten chocolate than in those who had not. When clots form this increases the likelihood of a blockage, which may lead to a heart attack.

A meta-analysis in the American Journal of Nutrition showed short term as well as long-term benefits of eating chocolate on cardiovascular disease risk factors including insulin resistance.

In The Journal of Hypertension, a study examined the effects of chocolate consumption on arteries in healthy people. Dr. Vlahopoulos' team found more relaxed arteries in the people who ate the chocolate versus placebo.

It may be too soon to proclaim chocolate as a health food but as Vlahopoulos told Health Day News, “a little chocolate might be okay.” What was found to be helpful were the flavonoids. Flavonoids are not unique to chocolate, however. They are antioxidants found in other foods such as berries, green and black tea and red wine. (blueberries and black currants have been found to have the highest amounts of these antioxidants). Flavonoids have been shown to be beneficial to the cardiovascular system by supporting the integrity of arteries and veins. This may help in conditions such as hypertension, and may help increase the “good” cholesterol.

No wonder it is called the “food of the gods”! However like everything we should probably follow the age old adage, everything in moderation ;)

