

Valentine's Day: 5 Health Benefits of Chocolate

Chocolate has been linked with Valentine's Day for decades, but its connection with love and seduction goes back centuries. Its health attributes also go back centuries: Legend says the Aztec's Montezuma drank honey mixed with chocolate each day to keep up his stamina.

Chocolate houses in 17th century London claimed it cured diseases, and Marie Antoinette's chocolate maker used chocolate mixtures to aid digestion and calm nerves.

During the 20th century, chocolate gained a reputation as being responsible for weight gain, high cholesterol and acne. Chefs named chocolate-laden desserts as "death by chocolate."

However, during the past 20 years, chocolate has almost been proclaimed as a miracle food because of an onslaught of scientific studies showing health benefits in areas ranging from heart diseases to Alzheimer's. "Health by chocolate" may now be a more accurate phrase.

"Cacao beans are rich in flavonols, a type of flavonoid that has antioxidant qualities, which are believed to help prevent damage caused by free radicals in the body," Alexandra Miller, RDN, LDN, and corporate dietitian at Medifast Inc., tells *Newsmax Health*.

Check out the following benefits of chocolate:

Alzheimer's: Eating a small amount of chocolate every day may keep your brain sharp as you age. An Italian study discovered that chemicals called flavanols that are found in chocolate can substantially reduce the risk of developing mild cognitive impairment in seniors—and can even reverse it.

Seniors with mild cognitive impairment drank either 990 mg, 520 mg or 45 mg of a chocolate flavored drink daily. After eight weeks, participants who drank the higher levels of flavanol drinks had significantly higher cognitive scores than those drinking the lower-level drinks. Researchers believe flavanols shield neurons from injury and may also increase blood flow to the brain.

Another study, published in the *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*, found that cocoa extract reduces the type of brain damage seen in Alzheimer's patients long before symptoms develop. Mice genetically engineered to mimic Alzheimer's disease were fed Lavado, a special preparation of cocoa extract, which is high in a form of antioxidants called polyphenols.

The extract prevented amyloid plaques—a characteristic of Alzheimer's disease that damages nerve cells—from forming in the brain.

"Given that cognitive decline in Alzheimer's disease is thought to start decades before symptoms appear, we believe our results have broad implications for the prevention of Alzheimer's disease and dementia," said lead investigator Dr. Guilio Maria Masinetti.

Obesity: Instead of causing obesity, several studies have found that chocolate can actually help you keep slim. A study of Californians published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* found that those who ate chocolate more frequently had a lower BMI (body mass index) than those who seldom ate it.

Another study, this one an analysis of European teens from Spain's University of Granada, found that those who ate chocolate had lower levels of total body fat, including abdominal fat, than those who avoided it.

"To gain the health benefits of chocolate while watching your

waistline, stick with a moderate portion of pure dark chocolate—about 1 ounce—made from at least 70 percent cacao a few times per week,” says dietitian Miller.

Diabetes: A cup of cocoa before bedtime can help you avoid diabetes, according to research published by the *European Journal of Nutrition*. Mice were fed a high-fat diet—the type that leads to Type 2 diabetes—but were also given cocoa powder in the human equivalent of 10 tablespoons. After 10 weeks, the amount of inflammation, which can trigger Type 2 diabetes by causing insulin resistance, was dramatically reduced. Researchers believe high amounts of flavanols, a natural antioxidant found in cocoa, are responsible for its protective effect.

A study published in the *Journal of Food Nutrition* found that people who eat diets high in flavonoids, such as those found in dark chocolate, lower their risk of Type 2 diabetes. Experts believe that flavonoids lower insulin resistance by raising the production of adiponectin, a protein that regulates glucose metabolism. “This is an exciting finding that shows that some components of foods we considered unhealthy like chocolate or wine may contain some beneficial substances,” said study co-author Tim Spector.

Heart attack and stroke: A 2015 English study published in the journal *Heart*, found that 12 percent of middle-aged and older adults who ate up to 3.5 ounces of chocolate a day (more than in two regular-sized Hershey’s bars) developed cardiovascular disease during the study compared to 17.4 percent of those who avoided the tasty treat.

That’s only the latest study to show chocolate helps prevent heart disease. An eight-year German study of almost 20,000 people found that those who ate an average of about two ounces of chocolate each day reduced their risk of both heart attacks and strokes by 39 percent.

A British review of seven studies found a 29 percent reduced risk of stroke in those who ate chocolate more than twice a week, and a 10-year Australian study found that women over the age of 70 who ate chocolate at least once a week were 60 percent less likely to die from heart failure during the study. In addition, a Swedish study found that women who ate more than 1.5 ounces of chocolate a week decreased their risk of stroke by 20 percent when compared to women who ate less than a third of an ounce every week.

Compounds in chocolate have been shown to improve circulation and to have blood-thinning properties. "In addition to its antioxidant power, flavonols appear to help improve cardiovascular health, namely by lowering blood pressure, improving blood flow to the brain and heart, and making blood platelets less sticky and able to clot," says Miller.

Although dark chocolate is usually recommended, studies have found that milk chocolate can also be beneficial. A Swedish study of more than 37,000 men found that those who ate about one-third cup of chocolate chips each week reduced their risk of stroke by 19 percent when compared to men who ate no chocolate at all. For every one-quarter cup increase in chocolate every week, the risk of stroke decreased an additional 14 percent.

Stress: In a study published in the *Journal of Proteome Research*, people who reported feeling highly stressed ate 1.4 ounces of dark chocolate (a regular Hershey's bar contains ounces) a day. Blood and urine samples found lower levels of the stress hormones cortisol and catecholamines at the end of two weeks.

Persistent coughs: A natural chemical found in chocolate called theobromine may stop both acute and chronic coughs, according to research taking place in England. When people with a persistent cough were given theobromine twice a day for 14 days, 60 percent of them experienced relief. An earlier

study found the chemical was more effective at stopping coughs than codeine. Researchers say the amount of theobromine found in a daily bar of chocolate is enough to block the nerves that stimulate the cough reflex.

“Know that while certain types of chocolate have shown promising benefits, there is still a lot we do not know, such as the quantity of chocolate and frequency at which it needs to be consumed to reap the benefits,” says Miller.

“Simply put, more research is needed,” she said. “So for now, enjoy in moderation and look for unsweetened and/or the least processed options you can find.”

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