



Six Tips for Choosing Healthy Chocolate

1. Dark chocolate is the healthy chocolate

Eating a small amount of dark chocolate every day can be good for you, says Mary Engler, PhD, RN, of the University of California, San Francisco, and colleagues.

Dark chocolate with high-cocoa content is loaded with epicatechin, a plant flavonoid which keeps cholesterol from gathering in blood vessels, reduces the risk of blood clots, and slows down the immune responses that lead to clogged arteries. Milk chocolate contains far less of the good stuff, and has other issues we'll talk about below.

Engler's team tested 21 healthy adults over two weeks. One group got a dark chocolate bar every day for two weeks, and the other group got a dark chocolate bar without flavonoids. The group who got chocolate *with* flavonoids performed better on blood-vessel testing than the group without the flavonoids.

2. Choose dairy-free dark chocolate

Most kinds of commercial dark chocolate also contain some dairy ingredients, and these limit the absorption of the good qualities of the cocoa. Dairy binds with antioxidants and prevents them from being helpful to the body.

When researchers from the University of Glasgow and Italy's National Institute for Food and Nutrition Research carried out tests using both dark chocolate and milk chocolate, they found that dark chocolate boosted blood antioxidant levels by nearly 20% whereas milk chocolate did not.

Surprisingly, however, when volunteers drank milk with the dark chocolate, all positive results were lost. "What this tells us, is that probably the proteins in milk bind with the antioxidants in chocolate," said Professor Alan Crozier of Glasgow University.

3. Higher percentages of cocoa are better

Scientific research to-date suggests that chocolate with a higher percentage of cocoa is high in antioxidants, which have many beneficial effects.

As the cocoa content of chocolate increases, so does its positive effects on health. A standard milk chocolate contains only about 30% cocoa, while premium dark chocolates usually have more than 65% and above.

According to research, fresh cocoa beans are super-rich in the type of flavonoid called *flavanols* which are very strong antioxidants. Cocoa/cacao beans contain 10,000

milligrams (10 grams) of flavanol antioxidants per 100 grams - or an amazing 10% antioxidant concentration level! Antioxidants help neutralize free radicals and keep them from damaging the DNA and mitochondria of the body's cells, which is a major cause of many degenerative diseases and heart disease.

Recent research has demonstrated that the antioxidants found in cacao beans are highly stable and easily available to the human metabolism.

4. Avoid mysterious additives

Chocolate is actually pretty simple: cocoa, cocoa butter, sugar, a little soy lecithin (to make sure it holds together) and vanilla. When it starts getting complicated, beware. Chances are, if you can't pronounce an additive's name or don't recognize it as the name of a plant or food, it's better to avoid it.

For instance, a new ingredient has appeared on chocolate labels – it's called PGPR. PGPR is polyglycerol polyricinoleate. It comes from castor beans, and it is a cocoa butter substitute. The problem with this is the cocoa butter contains the antioxidants. So if the cocoa butter is replaced by PGPR, you're losing the important antioxidant health benefits. Not to mention the chocolate flavor.

5. Choose organic chocolate over non-organic

What does “organic chocolate” mean? It means the cacao trees were not sprayed with pesticides and chemicals, thereby preventing contamination in the cacao fruit, the soil, and the water run-off to the land. When you eat organic chocolate, you're not being exposed to the chemicals and pesticides that could be present in non-organic chocolate.

While it may seem like a small thing to avoid chemicals in one piece of chocolate, we have to consider the larger picture: we're exposed to thousands of chemicals every day, and our body has to eliminate them. It's better for us to avoid the toxic load that chemicals and pesticides place on our bodies, even if it's with just one piece of chocolate because that's one set of chemicals that our body doesn't have to deal with.

The freedom from chemicals and pesticides extends to the other ingredients used as well, like organic sugar, soy lecithin, vanilla, and any flavorings. Something to watch for, though, is that some soy lecithin is made using genetically modified soybeans (GMO = Genetically Modified Organism). So look for “non-GMO soy lecithin” to be sure you're getting what nature intended.

Organic foods are good for you, and it's good for the environment and the workers involved in harvesting the plants as well. Organic means a better quality of life for everyone.



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6. Herbs and spices are good additions to chocolate

Adding common spices like cinnamon and chili to chocolate is a really good way to get even more health benefits.

Cinnamon has been recognized as a good support for blood sugar regulation and aids in cholesterol control. Cinnamon's unique healing abilities come from three components in the essential oils found in its bark: cinnamaldehyde, cinnamyl acetate, and cinnamyl alcohol.

Cinnamaldehyde has been well-researched for its effects on blood platelets. It helps prevent unwanted clumping of blood platelets, which improves blood flow. This is accomplished by inhibiting the release of an inflammatory fatty acid called arachidonic acid from platelet membranes. This ability puts cinnamon in the category of an "anti-inflammatory" food.

Chili powder also fights inflammation. Chili peppers contain a substance called capsaicin, which gives peppers their characteristic heat. Capsaicin is a potent inhibitor of substance P, a neuropeptide associated with inflammatory processes. The hotter the chili pepper, the more capsaicin it contains.

Red chili peppers, such as cayenne, have also been shown to reduce blood cholesterol, triglyceride levels, and platelet aggregation, while increasing the body's ability to dissolve fibrin, a substance integral to the formation of blood clots.

Chili also helps with circulation, boosts metabolism, reduces pain & helps brain function.

Final thought: Enjoy chocolate in moderation.

Dark chocolate has many health benefits. However, it also contains some fat and sugar. Eating too much will cancel any health benefits. Most experts agree that eating 1/4 oz of dark chocolate per day will give you the most health benefits. So enjoy your chocolate, and enjoy it in moderation.

Disclaimer: This article is not meant to provide health advice and is for general information only. Always seek the insights of a qualified health professional before embarking on any health program.

Thanks for reading!

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