

If You Love Them, Think Dark Chocolate

Tallahassee Democrat

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Giving your sweetie a gift of chocolate for Valentine's Day is a tradition that actually can be healthy if chosen wisely and eaten in moderation. The darker the chocolate, the less fat and sugar it contains and the healthier it is for you. Chocolate that is at least 70 percent cocoa is the most beneficial.

Dark chocolate is rich in flavonols, which are healthy antioxidants found also in fruits, vegetables, green tea, and red wine. Flavonoids give dark chocolate a slightly bittersweet taste. They also provide cardiovascular benefits, including reducing the risk of heart disease, stroke, cancer, and premature aging. Dark chocolate provides some specific health benefits that other varieties of chocolate do not. It may help to increase levels of HDL (good cholesterol); decrease the oxidation rate of LDL (bad cholesterol), which leads to artery plaque build-up; increase the time it takes for blood to clot; improve elasticity in blood vessels leading to healthy blood flow; improve mood and pleasure by boosting serotonin and endorphin levels in the brain; lower blood pressure among people with hypertension; and improve insulin resistance, which helps regulate blood sugar. (Persons with high blood pressure or diabetes should NOT replace other important blood pressure-reduction methods, such as medication and exercise, with eating dark chocolate).

Among different chocolate products, cocoa powder ranks highest in antioxidants. Studies by Cornell University food scientists show that a cup of hot cocoa has up to three times the antioxidants found in a cup of green tea and almost twice the amount in a glass of red wine.

Next in antioxidant value is dark chocolate, which contains about eight times the antioxidants of strawberries. While the exact amount to eat for maximum health effect is not known, 3/4 ounce of dark chocolate provides the same amount of antioxidants as a glass of red wine. You can satisfy a chocolate craving without blowing your diet with as little as 1/3 ounce. Decrease temptation and control portion sizes by freezing small servings.

Chocolate contains extra calories and is not always good for the waistline. Even dark chocolate can contain a lot of calories, saturated fat, and sugar. One ounce has about 150 calories. Similar antioxidants are available in vegetables, fruits, and whole grains, which are low-fat, high-fiber foods.

To get the heart healthy benefits, choose a small piece of dark chocolate, not milk or white chocolate. Milk chocolate, which most Americans eat, contains a low amount of flavonoids and antioxidant value compared to dark chocolate. It also is relatively high in sugar and saturated fat and has been shown to increase blood cholesterol levels. A standard-size 40-gram chocolate bar has eight grams of fat, but a one-cup serving of hot cocoa only has 1/3 gram of fat.

White chocolate, which is a blend of cocoa butter and sugar, contains almost none of the antioxidants found in dark chocolate. In addition, more than half the fat in white chocolate is saturated.

Always read the ingredients list of the food label on chocolate products. Look for palm, coconut, hydrogenated, and partially hydrogenated oils. Limit or avoid these unhealthy oils because they can raise blood cholesterol levels.

Antioxidant-rich fruit and chocolate make a pleasing combination. Dip a variety of fruits into some warm dark chocolate fondue as an occasional treat. Delicious dipping options include grapes, whole fresh strawberries,

thick banana slices, and dried apricot halves. Angel food cake cubes are another low-calorie, low-fat dipping choice.

Chocolate can fit within a healthful eating plan when you enjoy it as an occasional treat, not a replacement for healthy foods.

Source: *When It Comes to Chocolate, Choose Dark*, HGIC 4090, Clemson University Extension, 04/08.

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