

Dark Chocolate Has Health Benefits – and Calories

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Judy Corbus, Extension Agent, Washington/Holmes Counties Extension Service—Family & Consumer Sciences

CHOCOLATE

Between baking, parties, and gift exchanges, chocolate consumption typically rises this time of year. But isn't chocolate one of those "guilty indulgences?" Actually, *dark* chocolate is healthier for us than once thought. Dark chocolate comes from the *Theobroma cacao* plant, a rich source of flavonoids. Flavonoids are powerful antioxidants, also found in fruits and vegetables, linked with a reduction in heart attack and cancer risk. In addition, they help maintain strong bones, teeth, and healthy skin. A recent study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* concluded that dark chocolate can help reduce blood pressure and insulin resistance in persons at risk for developing type II diabetes or hypertension.

The key factor in providing health benefits is the percentage of cocoa solids in the chocolate. Dark chocolate (bittersweet and semi-sweet) has up to 75 percent cocoa solids, compared to 20 percent in milk chocolate and none in white chocolate. Dark chocolate also has been shown to improve mood. Unlike caffeine, also found in chocolate, which has a strong immediate effect and increases awareness, theobromine is a mild lasting stimulant in cocoa with a mood-improving effect. Another benefit of dark chocolate is increased levels of epicatechin, a strong flavonoid that prevents cholesterol from sticking in the blood vessels, reducing blood clot risk. Fortunately, chocolate companies have developed processing methods that retain 95 percent of the flavonoids in dark chocolate, thus maintaining their health benefits.

While dark chocolate has numerous health benefits, it also has a lot of calories; most chocolate bars are high in saturated fat so, remember, moderation. Dark chocolate does not replace healthy food choices so eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy products, lean meats such as poultry and pork, dried beans, and whole grains. Check recipes carefully; the beneficial effects of cocoa do not offset the high fat and sugar content in some recipes so choose carefully or modify. Semi-sweet chocolate chips and mini-sized dark chocolate bars work well in recipes.

Wrap and store chocolate carefully in a cool place, other than the refrigerator, to maintain freshness and avoid white discoloration. The discoloration, called "fat bloom," occurs when cocoa butter separates from the crystallized chocolate mixture and rises to the surface, according to Extension Nutritionist Dr. Barbara Struempler with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. This usually occurs when chocolate is stored at 70-75 degrees Fahrenheit. Chocolate stored loosely wrapped in the refrigerator often develops "sugar bloom." Moisture forms on the surface and sugar from the chocolate dissolves in it. As the moisture evaporates, a crust of white sugar crystals is left behind. Despite the discoloration, the chocolate is still safe to eat.

Sources: *Is Dark Chocolate Really Good for You?*, <http://extension.usu.edu/htm/news-multimedia/articleID=11115/print=true>

Dark Chocolate Benefits, <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pdf/FM/FM38300.pdf>

Blooming Chocolate Won't Hurt You, <http://www.aces.edu/dept/extcomm/newspaper/chocolate2.html>

If you have a question, write to Judy Corbus, Extension Agent Family and Consumer Sciences, University of Florida/IFAS-Washington and Holmes Counties Cooperative Extension Center, 1424 Jackson Avenue, Suite A, Chipley, FL 32428; or call the Extension Office, (850) 638-6265 between 8 a.m. to noon or 1 to 4 p.m. (CST) weekdays.

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