

Dark Chocolate and Cocoa—Healthy Treat in Moderation

It's February. Stores are brimming with red and pink hearts, roses, romantic cards, and of course chocolate! To many of us, the amount of chocolate everywhere can be dis-heartening as we are still on January's quest for health. Have no fear, health-minded friends—it is proven that chocolate, dark chocolate and cocoa that is, may actually benefit our health when consumed in moderation.

Dark chocolate and cocoa contain a greater amount of plant-based nutrients, or phytonutrients, called flavanols than do other forms of chocolate. In fact, these compounds have a bitter flavor and give the darker chocolate and straight cocoa their characteristic taste.

Past research has indicated that cocoa flavanols help in heart health; more recent research expands those findings to possible brain health benefits. In both cases, the phytonutrients, “positively affect the circulatory system and help maintain the flexibility of the arteries,” according to the November 2013 issue of Tufts University of Nutrition and Health Letter. In one study, the researchers found that older adults with hypertension and/or diabetes drinking two cups of cocoa each day for a month improved in both brain function and increased blood flow to the brain. Researchers at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston found that for a small group of subjects with impaired functions, average age 73, increased daily intake of cocoa improved their cognitive skills significantly.

So does this mean to eat a box of chocolates for good health every day? Unfortunately, no. But moderate quantities of dark chocolate or cocoa may be beneficial for some. Although there is no recommended amount that has been suggested by the research, those in the field propose limiting consumption to about 1-ounce per day. For example, that along with the flavanol-packed cocoa in the candy or hot drink, typically there is also a good bit of fat, sugar, and other less healthy components.

Choose darker types of chocolate (70% cocoa or higher) for heart and brain health benefits. And while you are at it, continue to make other heart-healthy choices including selecting low-fat or non-fat dairy foods and lean meats and getting plenty of fruits and vegetables daily—try melting your ounce of dark chocolate on strawberries, raspberries or bananas for a heart-healthy dessert!