

Chocolate — Good or bad? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Is chocolate bad for you?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Dinner's in a few hours. Lunch seems like it was ages ago. You still have to work on a paper, drive your little brother to soccer, and do the dishes. The deliciousness of chocolate and the sweet sugar/caffeine fix it offers may seem to be the only thing to get you through, so you reach for a bar... is that so bad? New research says no, and yes, depending largely on which type of chocolate you choose and how much of it you eat. Cacao, the bean from which chocolate is made, is not itself unhealthy. In fact, it offers many potential health benefits like lowering blood pressure, increasing sensitivity to insulin, improving coronary vasodilatation (widening of blood vessels) as well as other cardiovascular benefits, and acting as an anti-oxidizing agent. But not all chocolates are created equal.

The good guys in chocolate are flavonoids, health-promoting compounds found in plant-based foods (fruits, veggies, nuts, legumes) that belong to a larger class of compounds called polyphenols. In plants, flavonoids work to repair damage and protect from environmental toxins. When we consume plant-based foods rich in flavonoids, it appears that they can act the same ways in our bodies, offering antioxidant protection from free radicals, and protection from plaque formation on our arterial walls.

Dark chocolate is the most flavonoid-rich variety of chocolate, and therefore the most likely to offer health benefits. However, as chocolate is processed flavonoids are lost, and most commercial chocolates are highly processed. Flavonoids also tend to have a bitter flavor, so many commercial chocolates intentionally process them out. In addition, many chocolate products are made with milk, which can interfere with the antioxidant functioning of flavinols, negating most of the potential health benefits. Finally, many chocolate products are laden with caramel, nuts, marshmallow, and other high-fat, high-calorie add-ins that decrease the amount of flavinols in every bite and make a small chocolate snack a hefty caloric load. Even the best, most flavonoid-rich dark chocolate is replete with fat, sugar, and calories (one ounce of any kind of

chocolate has about 140 to 150 calories and nine to ten grams of fat), so if you're upping the amount of chocolate you eat to gain health benefits, keep in mind that you may want to trim calories in other areas.

One final consideration: there is currently no research that definitively suggests the amount of chocolate that needs to be eaten to achieve health benefits. You could also get the polyphenol-related health benefits by eating other flavonoid-rich foods like apples, red wine, tea, cranberries, and onions. That said, for most people, enjoying a small piece of dark chocolate once in a while is probably not going to be harmful, and is more favorable than reaching for the common trick-or-treat variety candy bar.

Over time chocolate has gotten a mixed reputation. It used to be seen as a fattening, pimple-producing crutch for the premenstrual. But chocolate **does not** cause acne, raise blood cholesterol, cause addiction, nor is it fattening if eaten in moderation. More recently, the pendulum has swung in favor of chocolate, which has come to be regarded as a kind of superfood. While it can offer some wonderful benefits, it may not be the antioxidant source of choice for everyone. Chocolate, as well as red wines and certain cheeses, contains phenylethylamine (PEA), a substance that can dilate blood vessels in the brain. People sensitive to PEA might find that eating chocolate can trigger headaches, even migraines. And for those prone to heartburn, chocolate can cause an episode, as would any other high-fat food.

So is chocolate bad for you? Each person can answer this question for themselves, taking into consideration which kind of chocolate is within reach and their own health needs. For most healthy and fit individuals, chocolate is a pleasurable and reasonably healthy way to get some flavonoids into the system. For those prone to migraines or who have to watch their fat intake, they might want to stick with the cranberries and onions.

Alice!

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