Chocolate everywhere

BUT WHICH ONE DO I EAT?

Mairlyn Smith, PHEc
Photos Scott Yavis

Chocolate has been catapulted from a little treat you buy at the corner store to an antioxidant superstar with health claims.

Does this mean the next time you grab a chocolate bar filled with nougat and nuts that you get an A+ for healthy eating? No, my friend, some things really are too good to be true.

ANTIOXIDANTS IN A CACAO POD

If you’re still unsure about what an antioxidant is, here’s the mini version: they’re the compounds that help neutralize free radicals; picture Xena:Warrior Princess, armed and dangerous in the fight against long-term disease.

Start your Valentine’s Day off with a cup of SPICY COCOA

1/4 cup [60 mL] natural cocoa powder
2 Tbsp [30 mL] granulated sugar
1/2 tsp [2 mL] ground cinnamon
1/4 tsp [1 mL] red pepper flakes
Pinch of cloves and cayenne
2 1/4 cups [560 mL] skim milk

In a glass measuring cup whisk together cocoa, sugar, cinnamon, red pepper flakes, and cloves and cayenne. Add 1/4 cup (60 mL) milk; whisk together till it forms a paste. Heat remaining milk in small saucepan. Whisk in cocoa paste till dissolved. Cover, gently simmer for 1 minute. Serves 2.

Each serving contains: 186 calories; 12 g protein; 1 g total fat [0.6 g sat. fat, 0 g trans fat]; 32 g carbohydrate; 2 g fibre; 146 mg sodium
More and more companies are developing new processing techniques to protect the cocoa flavanols from being reduced.
MINI LAVA CAKES

Use dark chocolate that has been processed correctly for the best flavanol hit.

1/4 cup (60 mL) 10 percent cream
6 oz (175 g) dark chocolate, broken into pieces
1/2 cup (125 mL) unsalted butter
3 large eggs
1/2 cup (125 mL) granulated sugar
1/2 tsp (2 mL) pure vanilla extract
1/4 cup (60 mL) cake and pastry flour

Pour cream into saucepan. Add 2 oz (50 g) chocolate. Heat on low; slowly melt chocolate, stirring occasionally. When chocolate is almost melted, remove from heat and stir till melted. Pour into glass measuring cup and place in fridge.

Place 4 oz (125 g) chocolate in clean, small saucepan. Add butter; heat on low. Melt slowly, stirring occasionally. When chocolate is almost melted, remove from heat, and stir till melted. Set aside.

In medium bowl beat eggs with sugar for 5 minutes or until the mixture is very thick. Beat in vanilla. Fold in melted chocolate. Sift flour over the batter and fold in till well incorporated.

Grease 6 - 4 oz (125 g) ramekins with unsalted butter. Scoop chocolate batter into ramekins till half full. Drop in 1 heaping teaspoon of the cooled chocolate mixture. Scoop remaining chocolate batter into ramekins. Store in fridge for 2 hours or up to 1 day.

To serve, preheat oven to 400 F (200 C). Remove ramekins from fridge. Bake for 15 minutes. Remove from oven and let cool for 5 minutes. Run knife around edges and flip onto plate. Serve with berries. Serves 6.

Each cake contains: 405 calories; 4 g protein; 22.5 g total fat (13.7 g sat. fat, 0 g trans fat); 43.5 g carbohydrate; 1 g fibre; 38 mg sodium
EATING WELL

Fair trade

To qualify for fair trade certification the plantation must "guarantee a minimum price and ensure that no abusive or exploitive child labour is used."

The criteria also stipulate that "farmers' organizations should be organized democratically and that plantation workers should be able to participate in trade union activities."

Fair trade producers are monitored at least once a year. —Source: Fair Trade Toronto

Chocolate contains antioxidant compounds called flavanols, specifically proanthocyanidins, also found in blueberries, apples, grape juice, cinnamon, and red kidney beans.

This compound may be responsible for many of the cardiovascular health benefits of chocolate, including reducing blood pressure; protecting LDL, the big bad-guy cholesterol, from oxidation; and raising HDL, the really good-guy cholesterol.

FROM CACAO POD TO CHOCOLATE

All chocolate starts off as a pod from the cacao tree. These pods are filled with about 40 white pulp-covered seeds, which are the cacao beans. Once harvested and separated from the pods the cacao beans are fermented, dried, cleaned, roasted, and then winnowed; a process that separates the shells from the nibs.

The nibs are ground and milled into a dark brown paste that contains cocoa liquor and cocoa butter. The cocoa butter is separated from the liquor, resulting in dark liquor and cocoa solids.

The cocoa solids are processed into cocoa powder. Chocolate manufacturers create their signature flavours using cocoa powder, cocoa liquor, and cocoa butter, with added ingredients such as milk and sugar.

IT'S THE PROCESSING THAT COUNTS

Cocoa manufacturers traditionally ferment the beans, roast them, and add an alkaline—the process is called Dutching—to improve the colour, texture, and flavour. The big problem is that all three of these steps reduce the amount of cocoa flavanols present. The
SIZE MATTERS

Before you grab your daily dose of dark chocolate—that’s been processed correctly—remember: size matters. You can’t eat an entire 8 oz (225 g) chocolate bar and expect to be healthier.

Chocolate has calories, and your body recognizes calorie overload, plus it’s a whiz at math. Too many calories in + not enough calories out = weight gain.

If you can afford the extra calories then you can have 1 oz (25 g) of dark chocolate daily.

impact of alkalizing alone reduces the total flavanol content by two-thirds.

Some chocolate manufacturers are labelling their products with the percentage of cocoa used in the product. But the cocoa content doesn’t necessarily mean that the cocoa flavanol content is high. What the percentage really does give the consumer an idea as to how intense the flavour of the chocolate will be.

More and more companies are developing new processing techniques to protect the cocoa flavanols from being reduced.

WHAT TO BUY

For high cocoa flavanols your best bet is to buy organic, raw, unprocessed cocoa nibs; an acquired taste, these really are the essence of chocolate. Cocoa powder? Look for natural. Chocolate? Check the label carefully.

If you’re buying dark chocolate with at least 70 percent cocoa mass listed on the front of the package, check out the label and look for Dutched processing or alkalized. If you see these words on the back label, it doesn’t really matter how much cocoa mass is listed. As they say in the world of linguistics, it’s moot.

When it comes to health and chocolate, skip white and milk chocolate; they have little or no antioxidants.

The bottom line is that if dark chocolate hasn’t been processed to protect those valuable antioxidants, it doesn’t matter if the chocolate fairies sprinkled pixie dust on them. When it comes to flavanols you might as well have a big bowl of kidney beans.

Mairlyn Smith, PHEc, is a passionate chocoholic. mairlynsmith.com

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