

DeKalb County Health Department

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Chocolate for Your Sweet Heart

Chocolate is a perennial favorite in February, with many people giving it to their sweethearts on Valentine's Day. It appears to have benefits for the heart beyond those related to love and affection. "Research indicates that chocolate contains various compounds that may help lower risk for heart disease", states Karen Grush, Public Health Administrator of the DeKalb County Health Department.

February is Heart Health Month. The healthy compounds in chocolate is this year's healthy heart focus at the Health Department. Soula Bahramis, nutritionist, with the Health Department's WIC (Women, Infants, and Children) Program, unwraps the facts and helps melt away some of the myths about chocolate.

Chocolate is an ancient food, derived from the pod of the cacao tree. More than 2,000 years ago, Mayans made a bitter drink with the substance. It made its way to Europe in the 1500s, where it underwent numerous processing modifications over several centuries to become what we now know as chocolate today. Throughout its history, chocolate has

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been used for health purposes, including for enhancing fertility and alleviating stomach ailments in early times, to preventing heart disease in recent times.

Many of the ancient claims about chocolate are not proven, but Bahramis says there is evidence to support the idea of chocolate being heart healthy. She explains that chocolate contains flavanols and polyphenols, which are phytochemicals, or compounds in food that provide certain health benefits. Flavanols and polyphenols in chocolate have been shown to slow the oxidation of LDL cholesterol (low density lipoprotein, the bad cholesterol), dilate blood vessels, prevent excessive blood clotting, help control blood sugar, and act as antioxidants, and, therefore, reduce the risk for heart disease.

An interesting heart related fact about chocolate is that it contains a high level of phenylethylamine, a chemical produced by the brain when we fall in love. This may explain the “addiction” that some of us feel about chocolate. Chocolate also boosts the serotonin levels in the brain, which gives us a feeling of calmness and relaxation.

With the benefits that have been described, a question arises. Is there a difference in health benefits between dark chocolate and milk chocolate? Bahramis says that dark chocolate and regular cocoa powder contain high amounts of flavanols and polyphenols, whereas milk chocolate and “Dutch-processed” cocoa do not. Even drinking milk while eating dark chocolate or cocoa powder greatly reduces the activity of these beneficial

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compounds. Another caution that Bahramis offers is about consuming excessive amounts of chocolate, even dark chocolate, since “it contains a lot of calories and fat, which can contribute to weight gain.”

Bahramis offers these tips on how to include chocolate as part of a healthy diet:

- Eat your chocolate and enjoy it. Savor the taste and texture.
- When eating chocolate, limit other high fat foods or cut your portion sizes. Make some modification in your eating plan to allow for the extra calories and fat that chocolate provides.
- Use cocoa powder in your desserts, which can save you as much as 10 grams of fat per ounce of cocoa compared to Baker’s chocolate.
- Eat chocolate with or soon after a meal. This will help avoid blood sugar fluctuations as well as binging.
- Buy chocolate in small serving sizes rather than large bars or boxes.

Chocolate can fit into a healthy diet as long as you eat a balanced diet with a variety of low fat foods and watch your portion sizes. The problem with eating chocolate is that we often eat too much and most of our intake is not the higher quality dark chocolate.

Chocolate can be a part of a heart healthy diet, lowering your risk of heart disease with its antioxidant properties as well as improve your mood. Enjoy and savor the flavor of chocolate.