



K-State Extension Connection

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Choose Dark Chocolate for Your Valentine

Barbara L. Ames

Wildcat District Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Agent

In 1861, Richard Cadbury created the first ever heart-shaped box of chocolates for Valentine's Day. Thus, began the tradition of chocolate and Valentine's Day that still carries on today.

It's easy to understand why chocolate is a favorite expression of love. It tastes delicious, has a pleasing aroma and texture, and chocolate can even fit within a healthful eating plan...BUT, only if it is enjoyed within certain guidelines. Clemson Cooperative Extension offers these tips to help us enjoy the benefits of chocolate.

The Darker the Better

The darker the chocolate is, the less fat and sugar it contains and the healthier it is for you. The most beneficial is dark chocolate that is at least 70% cocoa.

A Little Goes a Long Way

Dark chocolate can be good for you when eaten in moderation. Although we don't know the exact amount to eat for maximum health effect, $\frac{3}{4}$ ounce of dark chocolate provides the same amount (400 milligrams) of antioxidants as a glass of red wine. By eating as little as $\frac{1}{3}$ ounce, you can satisfy a chocolate craving without blowing your diet. Decrease temptation and control portion sizes by freezing small servings.

Health Benefits of Dark Chocolate

Dark chocolate is rich in flavonols, which are healthy antioxidants that also are found in fruits, vegetables, green tea, red wine, etc. Flavonoids give dark chocolate a slightly bittersweet taste. They also provide cardiovascular benefits, such as helping to reduce the risk for developing heart disease, stroke, cancer and even premature aging. Dark chocolate provides several specific health benefits that other varieties of chocolate do not such as increasing levels of HDL (good cholesterol) and decreasing the effects of LDL (bad cholesterol), which leads to artery plaque build-up. Dark chocolate may also improve elasticity in blood vessels leading to healthy blood flow, as well as improving mood and pleasure by boosting serotonin and endorphin levels in the brain.

Cocoa is one of the richest sources of antioxidants found in any food, and research shows that we should eat more antioxidant-rich foods. However, most of the antioxidants in the diet should come from nutrient-dense, low-calorie, brightly-colored fruits and vegetables and calorie-free green or black tea. Next in antioxidant value is dark chocolate, which contains about eight times the antioxidants of strawberries. There are as many antioxidants in 1.5 ounces of dark chocolate as there are in five ounces of red wine. Antioxidant-rich fruit and chocolate make a pleasing combination. Dip a variety of fruits into some warm chocolate fondue, preferably the dark variety, as an occasional treat.

Health Concerns of Chocolate

Chocolate contains extra calories and is not always good for the waistline. Even dark chocolate can contain a lot of calories, saturated fat and sugar. An ounce has about 150 calories. Similar antioxidants are available in vegetables, fruits and whole grains, which are low-fat, high-fiber foods.

To get the heart healthy benefits, choose a small piece of dark chocolate, not milk or white chocolate. Milk chocolate, which most Americans eat, contains a low amount of flavonoids and antioxidant value compared to dark chocolate. It also has a relatively high sugar and saturated fat content and has been shown to increase blood cholesterol levels. A standard-size 40-gram chocolate bar has eight grams of fat, but a one-cup serving of hot cocoa only has $\frac{1}{3}$ gram of fat. White chocolate, which is a blend of cocoa butter and sugar, contains almost none of the antioxidants found in dark chocolate. In addition, more than half the fat in white chocolate is saturated.

All chocolate contains small amounts of caffeine, an addictive stimulant that may cause headaches, insomnia, heart palpitations and digestive disorders.

Always read the ingredients list of the food label on chocolate products. Look for palm, coconut, hydrogenated and partially hydrogenated oils. These unhealthy oils should be limited or avoided, because they can raise blood cholesterol levels.

For more information about this topic or other topics, contact the Wildcat Extension District offices at: Crawford County, 620-724-8233; Labette County, 620-784-5337; Montgomery County, 620-331-2690; Wilson County, 620-378-2167; Pittsburg Office, Expanded Food and Nutrition Education (EFNEP), 620-232-1930. Wildcat District Extension is on the Web at <http://www.wildcatdistrict.ksu.edu>. Or, like our Facebook page at [facebook.com/wildcat.extension.district](https://www.facebook.com/wildcat.extension.district).

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