

For the Heart

Chocolate, for some, is the perfect romantic gift. With Valentine's Day just past, many of us may have indulged in chocolate's smooth, melt-in-your-mouth sweetness. But don't feel too guilty. Research shows that chocolate may be good for your heart in more ways than one.

Chocolate is rich in substances called flavonoids. These natural antioxidants – also found in fruits and vegetables, tea, and red wine – may help reduce the risk of blood clots and heart disease. The amount of flavonoids in chocolate depends on the type of cocoa bean and processing method used. The higher the cocoa content, the more flavonoids (which is why dark chocolate has the most health benefits). For example, white chocolate contains no chocolate "liquor," so it has no flavonoids. Dark chocolate has two to four times the amount of flavonoids that milk chocolate does. Dark chocolate contains almost five times the flavonoids of an apple.

A study from the *Journal of the American Dietetic Association* found that dark chocolate and cocoa powder may raise HDL (good) cholesterol by as much as 10 percent. At the same time, this study has found that LDL (bad) cholesterol in chocolate was less susceptible to oxidation, a process that normally leads to artery-clogging plaques. One-third of the fat in cocoa butter is composed of stearic acid. Stearic acid boosts also HDL levels. Even in people who ate milk chocolate regularly, their levels of LDL didn't increase as might have been expected from other fat consumption.

Other recent studies into the health benefits of chocolate include a small study published in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* suggesting that consumption of dark chocolate could improve glucose metabolism and decrease blood pressure. A team from the Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center at Georgetown University revealed in *Molecular Cancer Therapeutics* that they had identified a compound in chocolate called pentameric procyanidin, which is believed to hinder the progression of breast cancer.

But before you eat a pound of chocolate, remember that chocolate is high in fat and calories, especially when paired with gooey fillings or nuts. Most chocolate on the market is sweetened and has a low cocoa content; eating much of it could be more harmful than beneficial. Dark chocolate can often be more expensive, but if bought in bulk or on sale, it can be a great bargain. Regardless, you no longer need to feel guilty if you enjoy a small piece of chocolate once in awhile. And paired with other antioxidant-rich foods such as berries and wine, dark chocolate can be a part of a heart-healthy diet.