

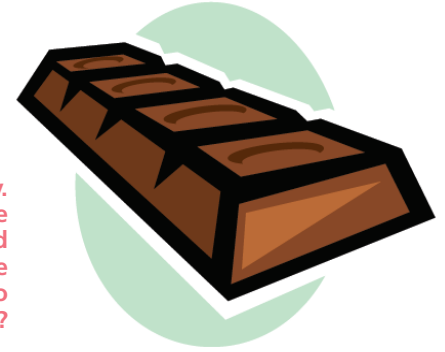


## The Healthy Kids Series

# Sweet News About Chocolate

| BY AMANDA AYERS |

The month of February is filled with everything chocolate in celebration of Valentine's Day. This confectionary holiday frightens health conscious parents as many children are sent home from school with chocolate hearts, chocolate cupids, chocolate bars, chocolate lips and chocolate stacked on top of chocolate. Wait before you start to discard all those delectable treats. A host of recent studies have revealed news about chocolate that at first seems too good to be true. Can one of the most delightful delicacies on earth actually be good for you?



In *Chocolate Unwrapped: The Surprising Health Benefits of America's Favorite Passion*, author Rowan Jacobsen states, "For 95 percent of its three-thousand-year history, chocolate has been a drink and a health food." Chocolate was discovered over 3,000 years ago by the Mesoamerican civilizations. In fact, the earliest evidence to date of the use of cacao stems from chocolate residue found in several jars discovered at a site in Oaxaca, Mexico dating from 1100 BC. This evidence indicates that the earliest use of cacao was as an alcoholic beverage called xocolatl. Xocolatl was believed to fight fatigue.

The higher the cocoa content, the less cocoa butter, sugar, lecithin, vanilla, milk and other ingredients that make chocolate less of a vegetable and more of a candy. As with all chocolates, the darker they are the less room there is for unhealthy ingredients like cocoa butter and the more for that healthy antioxidant-packed cocoa. Nutritionist Tina Reddington of Sodexo explains that chocolate is made from plants that are loaded with antioxidants. However, not all chocolate is created equal. The most flavonoids, pigments in plants that act as antioxidants, can be found in chocolate with non-fat cocoa solids, which usually means dark chocolate.

Health benefits of dark chocolate and cocoa that have been recently suggested in research studies include:

- **Decreasing the risks of heart attacks.**

According to Dian Becker, MPH, ScD, a researcher with the John Hopkins University School of Medicine, blood

platelets clotted more slowly in people who had eaten chocolate than those who had not. Becker said in an email interview with WebMD, "The flavanols in cocoa beans have a biochemical effect of reducing platelet clumping, similar to but much less than aspirin."

- **Decreasing blood pressure and increasing insulin sensitivity.**

Research proved that insulin resistance was found to be significantly lowered in people who ate three ounces of dark chocolate for fifteen days compared to those who ate white chocolate, which does not contain flavanol phytochemicals. The same study also found systolic blood pressure was lower in the group who ate the dark chocolate. Reddington explains, "Blood pressure regulation is believed to be due to the flavonoids which regulate the production of nitric oxide and balance certain hormones in the body."

- **Decreasing the effects of chronic fatigue syndrome.**

Another study showed a decrease in fatigue for adults eating one and a half ounces of 85% cocoa dark chocolate every day for eight weeks. Sodexo adds, "Researchers believe the chocolate enhances the neurotransmitters that help regulate mood and sleep."

- **Chocolate is composed of both saturated and unsaturated fats,**

but about 75% of these fats are in the form of oleic and stearic acids. Diets rich in these acids have been shown to lower cholesterol levels. While 25% of the fat in chocolate is

"bad fat," the amount of "good fat" in chocolate counteracts the "bad fat."

A study published in the *International Journal of Sport Nutrition and Exercise Metabolism* reports that plain old chocolate milk may be as good as or better than sports drinks like Gatorade and PowerAde at helping athletes recover from strenuous exercise. Chocolate milk is cheaper and a better recovery drink because it has an optimal ratio of carbohydrates to protein, which helps refuel tired muscles. Researchers also note that milk contains key nutrients such as calcium and vitamin D in quantities that sports drinks simply can not match. Instead of purchasing energy drinks for the team snack, grab some chocolate milk. It not only replenishes muscles, it also provides a well-deserved treat!

The bottom line is that indulging in a small amount of dark chocolate might be the perfect Valentine's Day treat, satisfying your sweet tooth while treating your body to the many health benefits of chocolate. So the next time you have a chocolate attack, reach for the dark chocolate and hold the guilt. If dark chocolate turns your kids off, then hand them chocolate milk! [wFm](#)

Articles in the Healthy Kids Series are presented by the Marine Corps Marathon Healthy Kids Fun Run to be held annually in October. The one-mile run welcomes children ages 6-13. For more information visit [www.marinemarathon.com](http://www.marinemarathon.com).

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