

Chocolate and Health

Craig M. Wax, DO

From time to time, the media proclaims, "Chocolate has health benefits!" It does sound too good to be true, doesn't it? The treat that most people have enjoyed since childhood could be healthy for you? The answer is yes and no...

The word "chocolate" comes from , "*Xocoatl*" from the Nahuatl language of the Aztecs of Mexico meaning, "bitter water." The chocolate residue found in an ancient Maya pot suggests that Mayans were drinking chocolate 2,600 years ago. The Maya word for the plant was, "Cacau."

Chocolate is made from the seed of the tropical cacao tree. Like coffee, cacao does not acquire the richness of its color and the fullness of its flavor until it is roasted. Today, chocolate commonly refers to bars made from the combination of cocoa solids, fat, sugar and other ingredients. Chocolate can also be made into beverages called cocoa and hot chocolate, as originated by the Aztecs and the Mayas.

There are many variations of chocolate on the US market. There are three basic types dark, milk and white chocolate. They are made from mixtures of sugar, cocoa butter, cocoa liquor, and optional milk or milk powder and vanilla. In the US, sugar is the main ingredient in most chocolate products so they are not healthy.

Dark chocolate has flavenoids/ flavenols (i.e. catechins) and polyphenols. These have shown to be beneficial to health in medical journals recently. An original article

documented research in 2003 that flavanol rich cocoa causes blood vessel dilation in healthy humans.¹ In Hypertension journal 2005, cocoa was shown to reduce blood pressure, insulin resistance, and improve blood vessel dilations in patients with hypertension (high blood pressure).² In Heart journal 2006, dark chocolate was shown to improve blood vessel lining and platelet function.³ Most recently, in the Archives of Internal Medicine 2007, again research showed that cocoa may lower blood pressure.⁴ This is exciting news chocolate lovers! Remember that the studies used more dark chocolate (100g) than most people can consume without adding many calories to their daily diets.

Be aware that most chocolate products available in the US are more sugar and corn syrup than actual cocoa. The US Food and Drug Administration requires only 10% cacao solids to be called, "chocolate." Currently, many worldwide products and a just a few US products are made with more chocolate liquor and cocoa than sugar. Also be aware that the more original cocoa that a product has, the more theobromine (caffeine-like stimulant) that it contains.

Read the label, as always. Buy chocolate that is at least 65% cocoa. So called "gourmet" products in supermarkets are 72% cacao. Hershey's and Ghirardelli are two brands that feature this mixture. Fair trade Vintage Plantations from Ecuador feature 55%, 65% and 90% dark chocolate bars. These can be made into hot chocolate drinks with milk or soy milk. If you want to try a healthy treat, try a hot 90% chocolate soy milk drink with no added sugar. It incorporates the health benefits of soy and chocolate. Its taste is something between that of hot chocolate and coffee and is out of this world.

Keeping Your Mind Fit

American Osteopathic Association

“Exercise is just as healthy for your mind as it is for your body,” explains Craig M. Wax, D.O., an osteopathic family physician, practicing in Mullica Hill, NJ. “Regular physical exercise will not only help your cardiovascular health, but it will increase blood flow to the brain and help with your creativity and memory.”

In addition, the calming benefits of exercising will reduce stress, which can cause memory problems. Physical activity can also prevent depression, which slows thinking. Exercise will clear the mind and allow for creative thinking and a problem-solving state of mind. For example, studies have shown that after walking for 15 minutes, individuals will increase their memory and ability to multi-task by more than 15%.

Relaxation techniques, such as yoga and meditation, are also beneficial for the brain.

“There are many ways to keep your mind active,” explains Dr. Wax. Dr. Wax further explains that memory exercises can help fight age-related memory loss such as dementia.

Dementia is a neurological disorder that affects the ability to think, speak, reason, remember and move. The most common form of dementia, Alzheimer's disease, involves a loss of nerve cells in the areas of the brain that control memory and other mental functions. As the disease progresses, it affects language, reasoning and understanding.

The precise cause of Alzheimer's disease is unknown, but risk increases with age. Ten percent of the population over the age of 65 has Alzheimer's, and nearly half of the population over 85 has the disease.

Dr. Wax recommends including food rich in the following in your diet.

Vitamin E- Vitamin E is found in all cells, including the cells of the brain. You can eat foods like almonds, green leafy vegetables and whole grain flour to benefit from the different forms of this vitamin.

Vitamin B- Every type of Vitamin B helps in preserving brain function and sharpness. Early brain development, declining memory and inability to focus have been linked with low levels of folic acid and Vitamins B-12 and B-6.

Vitamin C- Eating plenty of broccoli, legumes, oranges and strawberries will give you a large dose of this vitamin, which helps keep the brain healthy.

Magnesium- Approximately 300 milligrams one to three times a day will help protect the brain from many substances that damage nerve cells.

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155 North Main Street
Mullica Hill, NJ 08062

856-478-4780

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