



Quick Bites — Chocolate

There have been quite a few interesting scientific studies emerging about chocolate over the past few years. There's also a lot of confusion about chocolate—what type to eat and how much, types to avoid, etc., so I hope to dispel some of the myths on this subject.

The number of health benefits now associated with the cocoa bean is really quite impressive, including benefits to your heart and blood vessels, brain and nervous system, improved insulin sensitivity, and even possibly slowing down the rate at which you age. Cacao's benefits are related to compounds naturally occurring in the bean, including epicatechin and resveratrol.

Cacao contains an antioxidant called epicatechin, thought to help shield your nerve cells from damage. Norman Hollenberg, a professor of medicine at Harvard who has spent years studying the Kuna people of Panama who consume up to 40 cups of cocoa a week, believes epicatechin is so important it should be considered a vitamin. The Kuna have less than a 10 percent risk of stroke, heart failure, cancer and diabetes, which are the most prevalent diseases ravaging the Western world.

Besides epicatechin, cacao is also high in resveratrol, a potent antioxidant found in red wine, known for its ability to cross your blood-brain barrier to help protect your nervous system.

What to Look for When Selecting Chocolate

The closer your cocoa is to its natural raw state, the higher its nutritional value. Ideally, your chocolate or cocoa should be consumed raw (cacao).

When selecting chocolate, you can optimize its nutritional punch by looking for higher cacao and lower sugar content. In general, the darker the chocolate, the higher the cacao. However, cacao is fairly bitter, and the higher the percentage cacao, the more bitter it is. The flavanols are what make the chocolate bitter, so manufacturers often remove them. But, it's those flavanols that are responsible for many of chocolate's health benefits.

To counteract the bitterness, most chocolate is sweetened, so it's a matter of balancing nutritional benefit with palatability.

Although raw cacao is the most nutritious form, most of the health studies to date involve consumption of cocoa or chocolate, not raw cacao. But the results are STILL significantly positive. This fact suggests a good portion of the nutritional benefit of chocolate is retained after processing. Your goal then is to find a chocolate that's as minimally processed as possible, but still palatable. You don't want to eliminate too many of the health benefits by eating a product that contains a lot of sugar and chemicals. Choose chocolate with a cocoa/cacao percentage of about 70 or higher.



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