

Health

Chocolate medicine



Kathryn Borg

If you have had a heart attack or are suffering from a serious illness, a bar of chocolate is the last thing you would expect your doctor to recommend. However, new evidence suggests that chocolate could save your life by reducing your risk of having a fatal heart attack in the future.

It is understandable you would question how such a high-fat, sugar-laden treat can be good for us. However, dark chocolate bars which are at least 70 per cent cocoa solids, were used in the studies. Although these bars typically include about 12 grams of sugar, the cocoa apparently offers such a healthy benefit that it counteracts any adverse effects from the sugar.

The key ingredients in cocoa are flavanols, a subgroup of the natural antioxidant plant compounds called 'flavanoids'. These are already well-known for their heart-healthy effects (*Nutr Today, 2002*). In fact, the Kuna Indians of Panama regularly consume large amounts of flavanol-rich cocoa and are virtually free of hypertension and stroke, despite the fact that they add salt to their foods (*Med Hypotheses, 2009*).

The fat in chocolate is present in the form of stearic triglycerides, which increase good HDL cholesterol and are readily cleared from the body through the gut (*Crit Care Nurse, 2007*). Also, the fat slows the rate at which the sugar is released into the

bloodstream, making dark chocolate a low glycaemic index (GI) food.

The new evidence comes from the Stockholm Heart Epidemiology Programme, where Swedish researchers questioned over 1,000 heart attack survivors about their chocolate consumption. They subsequently followed them for eight years to monitor their health. As a result, they discovered that the more chocolate was eaten (dark chocolate), the lower the risk of death due to heart disease – even after taking into account other risk factors such as obesity, smoking and alcohol consumption.

Regular consumption was classed as two or more times a week and those who consumed at that rate

were up to three times less likely to die of heart problems than those who avoided it. Even eating chocolate less than once a month had a significant protective effect (*J Intern Med, 2009*). Keep in mind that we are still referring to dark chocolate with a strong cocoa base.

To reinforce the type of chocolate which is beneficial, one study found that dark chocolate dramatically reduced blood pressure in 20 mildly hypertensive patients who were randomly given either 100 grams of dark chocolate or 90 grams of white chocolate every day for two weeks. Only those consuming dark chocolate showed positive results, causing systolic blood pressure (BP) to drop by an average of 11.9mmHg and diastolic BP by 8.5mmHg. This means that dark chocolate is as effective as many of the anti-hypertensive drugs currently on the market (*Hypertension, 2005*).

At the University of Cologne in Germany, doctors ran a similar study but with less chocolate. Interestingly, even with a smaller amount (6.3 grams a day; equal to 30 calories) a reduction in BP by almost 3mmHg was seen. If we take this small drop across a whole population it would reduce the risk of stroke mortality by eight per cent, it would reduce coronary artery disease mortality by five per cent and of all cause mortality by four per cent. (*JAMA, 2007*).

It seems the benefits of dark chocolate go further than just heart health. According to further research, eating chocolate rich in flavonols can help to protect the skin from harmful ultraviolet radiation. This was looked at in a study with 30 volunteers over a 12-week period (*Cosmet Dermatol, 2009*).

“Dark chocolate is as effective as many of the anti-hypertensive drugs currently on the market”

Diabetes could be helped by eating 100 grams a day of dark chocolate after a study saw an improvement in insulin sensitivity in healthy volunteers (*Am J Clin Nutr, 2005*).

In Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) 15 grams of dark chocolate three times a day showed a significant improvement in fatigue and physical functioning over an eight-week period. Two of the patients were able to return to work after having suffered CFS symptoms for two years (*Endocrine Abstracts, 2006*).

It is always a concern when research is produced referring to a product that is popular and could be misconstrued. As a result, the population starts buying it in bulk, quoting to anyone who wants to hear that you should eat as much chocolate as you can, as it helps your heart. This has happened in the past with red wine. It is important to focus on the fact that the product referred to in the research is dark chocolate, which is high in flavanols and has a high cocoa content.

However, while it may be some time before we see doctors starting to recommend a bar of chocolate along with an apple a day, it certainly does seem that the old adage holds true: 'a little of what you fancy does you good.'
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