

“Take a candy bar and call me in the morning”. Don’t laugh. New research ranks chocolate with red wine, berries, apples and green tea for nutritional benefit and connects chocolate with cardiovascular health. Should we eat chocolate for its health benefits as well as its taste?

Chocolate is known to contain flavones (called flavonoids in other plant foods), substances that have strong antioxidant properties. Antioxidants have been found to prevent lipoproteins, fat-like substances in the blood, from oxidizing and clogging arteries. Dark chocolate actually has a higher content of antioxidant than either red wine or green tea. Of course, green tea has the added benefit of no calories and no fat. Chocolate contains fat, and therefore, calories. Not to worry, though, chocolate’s fat is the “good fat” found in plant foods that increases “good” cholesterol.

Cocoa, the main ingredient in chocolate, contains iron, calcium, potassium, and vitamins A, B, C, D and E, and is the highest natural source of magnesium. Magnesium helps to relax smooth muscles in the blood vessels, allowing them to dilate. Relaxed blood vessels lower blood pressure. In addition, magnesium plays an important role in maintaining and improving bone density.

Derived from the Cacao tree in the rain forests of Central America, the cacao beans, valued for their scarcity, eventually became the cocoa bean, so named by European explorers. The word chocolate actually evolved from the name the Aztecs gave the beverage they fermented from raw cocoa beans, xocolat. The drink was brought to Europe where sugar and vanilla were added to disguise the bitter taste, and xocolat became chocolate.

So feel free to indulge over the holidays, but, choose your chocolate wisely. It should be solid, so avoid the sugary soft centers. Ideally, it should contain 70% cocoa, more likely to be found in dark chocolate. Milk chocolates and white chocolate contain 30%. Processing destroys some of the beneficial properties, and therefore, cocoa powdered drinks and chocolate syrups should not be your first choice.

The initial research is encouraging, though more research needs to be done, before you’re sent home from the doctor’s office with a prescription for chocolate. Meanwhile, eating two ounces a day of plain dark chocolate can be beneficial. Enjoy and happy holidays!