



## Make This Valentine's Day *Heartfelt*

| BY JUDY CAPLAN |

One of my favorite things to do on Valentine's Day is to read the sayings on the candy hearts. Last year one of the hearts read, "Life without chocolate is no life at all." This nutritionist completely agrees and, since she thinks eating chocolate is one of life's greatest pleasures, maybe we should know a little more about this scrumptious dark substance that we all adore.

While chocolate has been around a long time, it has not always gotten good press. Lately, though, chocolate's reputation as a healthful food has skyrocketed. Let's take a look at what the experts are now saying:

### The Pros

Scientists report preliminary evidence shows chocolate may keep high blood pressure down, help blood flow, and keep your heart healthy. Cocoa mass, the main ingredient in chocolate, contains flavonoids. Flavonoids are plant compounds with potent antioxidant properties. Scientists have already discovered over 4000 types of flavonoids. Red wine, tea, cranberries, peanuts, strawberries, apples, and many other fruits and vegetables also contain flavonoids. Unfortunately chocolate syrup has most of the flavonoids removed during processing and some cocoas are higher in flavonoids than others due to the type of manufacturing. Dark chocolate is higher in flavonoids than milk chocolate.

Researchers looked at chocolate's effect on blood pressure after studying residents on the island of Kuna in Panama who drink about 5 cups of cocoa each day and include it in many recipes. When they leave the island and move elsewhere, their blood pressure increases. Studies found it was not related to salt intake or obesity. Because of these findings, researchers at Harvard School of Medicine gave volunteers in Boston cocoa with either a high or low amount of flavonoids. Those who drank the cocoa with more flavonoids showed higher

nitric oxide activity. Why might this be important? Because nitric oxide plays an important role in the maintenance of healthy blood pressure.

Another study compared how blood platelets respond to a flavonoid-rich cocoa drink with 25 mg. of semi-sweet chocolate pieces and a blood thinning, 81 mg. aspirin. Researchers found similar reactions to the two from a group of 20 to 40 year olds. Both the drink and the aspirin prevented platelets from sticking together or clotting, which can impede blood flow. In other words, flavonoid-rich cocoa and chocolate act similarly to low dose aspirin in promoting healthy blood flow. Reducing the blood's ability to clot also reduces the risk of stroke and heart disease.

Okay, so that is the good news; however, it does not give you license to stop taking your daily aspirin or go "hog wild" and eat chocolate with abandon. Here are the reasons why:

### The Cons

Chocolate is full of sugar and sugar contains calories and no nutrients. So when you eat chocolate you have to balance it with less calorie-dense, nutrient-laden foods (fruits, veggies, beans.) And just because chocolate contains lots of antioxidants or flavonoids, like fruits and veggies, it does not mean chocolate is a substitute for fresh produce! There is little fiber and water in chocolate and these important nutrients are abundant in fruits and vegetables. Plus eating too much sugar plays havoc with your blood sugar levels, decreases bone density, and can cause food binging in susceptible individuals.

Chocolate also contains a significant amount of fat, which is high in calories. Interestingly though, it is not chocolate's natural fat that is

harmful. Most of chocolate's natural fat comes from cocoa beans which contain a considerable amount of "good fat" or oleic acid (the fatty acid abundant in olive oil). It also contains stearic acid which has been shown to have a neutral impact on cholesterol.

But here is the rub. If you look at the ingredients in many chocolate bars and gourmet chocolate treats, you will find they contain hydrogenated or partially hydrogenated fats (not to mention artificial flavors and preservatives.) These artery-clogging fats are very bad for your arteries and counteract the good fats that occur naturally in the chocolate. Food manufacturers add these hardened fats to control the consistency of chocolate and to help keep it more solid at room temperature.

So what is a chocolate lover to do?

1. Look for dark chocolate with higher levels of cocoa mass.
2. Avoid chocolate with added hydrogenated fats, preservatives, and additives.
3. Plan ahead. Remember chocolate contains calories and fat - 80 calories of chocolate (3 Hershey Kisses) is the same amount of calories as one slice of bread and 1/2 pat of butter.

This Valentine's Day give the gift of a healthy heart along with all your lovin' and kissin'. [wFm](#)



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