

Chocolate....the sweet truth!

Traditionally mince pies signify Christmas and at Easter we are confronted by a huge choice of chocolate eggs and bunnies – should this be an excuse to indulge in these delectable treats? After all, various news articles have been telling us that chocolates have many heart-health benefits, but does it really have these health-giving properties?

Cocoa beans which are used to make cocoa and certain types of chocolate are rich in a specific type of antioxidant called flavanols. They are also found in a number of plant foods such as tea, red wine, grapes, apples, berries, beans and nuts. These flavanols are powerful antioxidants which help protect us against the harmful effects caused by free radicals in our bodies. Recent research suggests that the components of cocoa and certain chocolates may have beneficial effects on the cardiovascular system, kidney function, brain health, immune system, diabetes and blood pressure.

Although more research is needed to support the health connection of cocoa and chocolate, some of the positive heart-health effects that have been reported are that they may:

- help lower LDL (bad) cholesterol so may limit the build-up of plaque in arteries
- raise HDL (good) cholesterol
- reduce the tendency of blood platelets becoming 'sticky', so helps prevent blood clotting
- help lower blood pressure in people who have hypertension
- improve insulin resistance and help maintain healthy blood sugar levels

Does this mean that you can binge on chocolate?

As cocoa beans need to go through a number of steps before being processed into your favourite chocolate product, the flavanol content may be affected. Most commercial chocolate products (including milk chocolate, white chocolate, chocolate syrup and chocolate drinks) have low levels of the healthy flavanols, but dark chocolate appears to retain higher levels. In general, the more natural cocoa there is in a product, the higher the flavanol content. When choosing chocolate products, rather opt for dark chocolate with a higher percentage of cocoa (at least 70%) and use natural cocoa (pure cocoa powder) for baking or desserts.

Another thing to bear in mind about chocolate is its high fat and sugar content, which provides extra calories. There are no official recommendations for the amount of chocolate you would need to enjoy its health benefits, but for people who can afford the additional calories - 50g (10 small blocks) of dark chocolate per week or a daily cocoa drink with skim milk doesn't seem to be harmful. For people who are overweight or obese, it would be best to limit chocolate intake.

Even though dark chocolate may provide potential health benefits – remember to enjoy it in moderation. You can celebrate Easter with a small treat of dark chocolate as part of a healthy diet. Remember to include a variety of other antioxidant rich foods such as fruit, vegetables and whole grains on a daily basis.

Written by Erika Ketterer, Registered Dietician at the Heart and Stroke Foundation, S.A.