



Calling All Chocaholics!

Here at HEALTHIBEING, we firmly believe in the wise and age-old philosophies of consuming “everything in moderation” & “a little of what you fancy does you good!” Whilst some may believe that these sayings encourage overindulgence, we believe that completely avoiding certain foods or drinks on an ongoing basis may actually lead to cravings and an unhealthy relationship with food.

Given the current economic climate and all stresses and strains of financial uncertainty around at the moment, we felt that this month we'd have a delve into the history of one of our nation's favourite treats, let you know a bit more about its health benefits and tell you what to look out for when making that all important selection in the supermarket or your local farm shop, so hopefully you can occasionally indulge your chocolate craving and maybe feel good about it!

A Very Brief History of Chocolate.....

Botanists still can't agree on where cacao or cocoa as we now commonly call it, originated from: some say in the Amazon region, others say Central America and still others say both: This uncertainty stems from the fact that there are two main kinds of cocoa; the Amazonian variety, which has large deep purple beans and the Central American variety, which is paler and has smaller beans.

The Central American variety was the mainstay of the ancient Olmec and Mayan civilisations. Between 300 and 900 AD, the Mayans developed a whole ritual around the gods of cocoa, and the use of drinks made from cocoa was central to their culture. When the Aztec invaders conquered Mexico, they adopted this cocoa culture and established a trading relationship with the Mayans.

In those days, cocoa beans were actually used as currency and in fact today the beans are still used as small change in village markets when there aren't any coins to hand! The diet of the Central American civilisations was based on maize, beans, and pumpkins. Meat was infrequent, alcohol was rare and dairy products nonexistent. Cocoa supplied stimulation and was prized as an essential component of their diet thanks to the protective nutrients it contained.

So What's So Good About Chocolate?

When we talk about the health benefits of chocolate, what we're really talking about are the health benefits of cocoa; the primary ingredient in a bar of chocolate. This is why the most important thing to look out for when choosing a bar of chocolate is the level of cocoa solids it contains and thus why dark chocolate is actually better for you than milk chocolate as it contains more cocoa. What you need to look for in any bar of chocolate is at least 70% cocoa solids to ensure you're getting some health benefits from your indulgent treat. You'll find that most commercial brands don't come anywhere close to this level.

Cocoa is Naturally Good For You; Here Are Some of The Reasons Why:

- **Polyphenols** - cocoa is full of polyphenols, the strong antioxidant plant compounds, which are also present in red wine, green tea, grape seed and bilberries. A single 20g bar of dark chocolate contains 400 mg of polyphenols, the minimum daily requirement.
- **Magnesium** - cocoa is the plant world's most concentrated source of dietary magnesium. Magnesium deficiency can create symptoms of premenstrual tension and may in part explain the premenstrual craving many women feel for chocolate. Magnesium helps to encourage muscle relaxation, strong bones and relaxed blood vessels.
- **Copper** - an important co-factor in preventing anaemia and in ensuring that iron makes effective haemoglobin. For the Mayans, chocolate is a symbol of human blood, much like wine in Christianity, perhaps this explains why.

Abundance of Research Into the Health Benefits of Cocoa

There is actually an abundance of research into the health benefits of cocoa. One recent and very interesting study showed remarkable health benefits for cocoa in diabetic patients. Patients with diabetes are prone to cardiovascular complications, so this study set out to find whether cocoa could be used as part of a treatment plan for the prevention of cardiovascular disease in diabetic patients.

In the study. Diabetic patients were given a high-flavonol cocoa drink for one month and results showed that in this short time, blood vessel function went from severely impaired to normal. This improvement was as large as has been observed with exercise and many common diabetic medications.

Another recent study showed that flavonol-rich chocolate may help to boost blood flow in the brain and reduce the risk of dementia and stroke, extending previous studies linking consumption of flavonol-rich cocoa to improved cardiovascular health.

“To our knowledge, this is the first study to directly investigate the effect of both acute and short-term flavonol-rich cocoa (FRC) consumption on cerebral blood flow,” wrote lead author Farzaneh Sorond in the journal *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*.

Making the Right Chocolate Choices

There are times when only chocolate will satisfy that inner craving for something sweet, so it's comforting to know that chocolate is actually one of the best choices you can make when selecting your sweet treat. As with most processed foods though, there are both good and seriously bad choices that you can make when selecting your preferred chocolate bar. Unfortunately, some of the ingredients of the more common brands include undesirables such as extremely high levels of sugar, saturated fats, hydrogenated fats, artificial flavourings, additives and even artificial sweeteners. If the chocolate isn't organic you'll also be exposed to a whole host of other chemicals, which could have harmful effects on your health.

Get a bit more consumer savvy with your chocolate though and you can cut out most of these ingredients, without skimping on taste, and simply enjoy the health benefits chocolate has to offer.



Should I Buy Organic?

The global organic debate continues unsettled with plenty of supporters both for and against the movement. For cocoa though, there is an incredibly strong case for buying organic, not simply for the benefits for your own health but also to protect the health of the farmers growing cocoa.

Consumer interest in chocolate began in the early 1900's and by the late 1970's a staggering 2.5 million tonnes of cocoa beans were being turned into chocolate annually. This booming demand was met by growers in West Africa, Malaysia, Brazil and other countries in South and Central America. When demand raced ahead of supply, the response of countries such as America and Britain was to recommend methods of intensive farming that would create a global overcapacity in cocoa. This inevitably meant the promotion of using pesticides on cocoa crops.

What most people are unaware of is that in cocoa-growing areas where pesticides are frequently used, skin conditions and lung diseases are commonplace. At one point on some plantations, the rate of birth defects was so high that in extreme cases, plantation owners would insist female workers be sterilised before offering them jobs, to avoid any risk of a legal case if too many babies were born with abnormalities.

Even nowadays, where some of these chemicals have been phased out, traces remain in the soil. Of all the food crops grown, more pesticides are used on cocoa than any other.

A Summary of What to Look for When Buying Chocolate

- Always buy organic chocolate and make sure this is guaranteed by a reputable organisation like the Soil Association; this means you can be assured that you aren't consuming harmful chemicals and ensures a safe working environment for cocoa farmers.
- Make sure you choose a bar of chocolate that has at least 70% cocoa solids to maximise your intake of the naturally healthy components such as polyphenols.
- Choose a bar that has minimum ingredients; avoid anything that contains artificial flavourings, additives or sweeteners
- Avoid chocolate that contains hydrogenated fat
- Choose a chocolate bar with lower levels of sugar; the flavour shouldn't be sickly sweet - you should be able to taste the natural strong flavour of cocoa
- One of the best organic chocolate brands on the market at the moment with at least 70% cocoa solids, a simple ingredients list and reduced sugar content is Green & Black's.
- *Choose carefully and above all enjoy your chocolate!*

Sources:

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- Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment. Volume 4, Pages 433-440
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