

Ah, the fragrance of chocolate....

Here's what I call a balanced diet – chocolate in both hands!

But seriously, folks – delicious, melt-in-your-mouth chocolate is one of the most powerful antioxidants on earth.

Finally, some good news!

What are the benefits of chocolate? I thought you would never ask. In moderation, chocolate is extremely beneficial.

- Chocolate is rich in flavonoids, a substance that helps protect plants from environmental toxins and helps repair damage. When we eat chocolate, we also benefit from this "antioxidant" power. It helps cells to resist damage caused by free radicals that are formed by normal processes such as breathing, and from environmental toxins, like cigarette smoke. If your body does not have enough antioxidants to combat the amount of oxidation that occurs, it can become damaged by free radicals.
- Flavanols are the main type of flavonoid found in chocolate. In addition to having antioxidant qualities, research shows that flavanols have other effects on vascular health, such as lowering blood pressure, improving blood flow to the brain and heart, and making blood platelets less sticky and able to clot.

Cheaper grades of chocolate are often highly processed with added chemical oils and sugars. Most major chocolate manufacturers are looking for ways to keep the flavanols in their chocolates. Your best choice is dark chocolate over milk chocolate. Look for organic chocolate with natural ingredients you can pronounce.

What about the fat in chocolate? It comes from cocoa butter and is made up of equal amounts of oleic acid (a heart-healthy monounsaturated fat also found in olive oil), stearic and palmitic acids. Stearic and palmitic acids are forms of saturated fat. Stearic acid appears to have a neutral effect on cholesterol, neither raising nor lowering it. Although palmitic acid does affect cholesterol levels, it only makes up one-third of the fat calories in chocolate. We need to have some healthy fat in our diet, so it may as well be the fat we enjoy!

And then there's the sugar. The good news is the darker the chocolate, the less percentage of sugar it tends to contain.

Enjoy your healthy bits of chocolate, in moderation. The key is to enjoy!