

Sweet! Weird ways chocolate keeps you healthy

By Mara Betsch



Show your heart some love this Valentine's Day by nibbling a few chocolates—and making them a regular treat throughout the year. A recent study found that those consuming the highest levels of chocolate had a 37% reduction in cardiovascular disease and a 29% reduction in stroke compared to those with lower chocolate intakes.

1. Chocolate may help you with math.

Flavonols, compounds in chocolate with antioxidant-like properties, are thought to improve circulation, including blood flow to the brain. A 2009 study asked participants to count backward in groups of three from a number between 800 and 999. After drinking hot cocoa filled with flavonols, the participants were able to do calculations more quickly and accurately and were less likely to feel tired or mentally drained.

2. Chocolate fills you up.

Moms have forever warned of spoiling dinner by eating a treat beforehand. Turns out they were right. Danish researchers gave 16 participants 100 g of either dark or milk chocolate and 2 hours later offered them pizza. Those who consumed the dark chocolate ate 15% fewer calories than those who had milk chocolate, and they were less interested in fatty, salty, and sugary foods.

3. Chocolate makes you feel better.

Chocolate contains phenethylamine, which triggers the release of endorphins. This reaction is similar to the one that people experience when they fall in love. Don't believe us? Doctors at the Mind Lab in England asked six couples to let squares of dark chocolate melt in their mouths and then kiss, all while hooked up to brain and heart monitors. Both tasks made participants' hearts pound and brains buzz, but chocolate doubled excitation rates in the brain's pleasure center during the kiss, especially in women. Cocoa's blend of sugar and caffeine produces a longer-lasting high, according to researchers.

4. Chocolate helps you relax.

Reach for a Hershey bar when you're stressed? There's a biological reason for that. Studies have shown that chocolate contains the compound anandamide that activates the same brain receptors as marijuana. No wonder a bite brings on bliss.

5. Chocolate may help you live longer.

A study in the British Medical Journal found that candy consumption can help you live longer—almost a full year longer!—than those who abstain from the sweet stuff. Participants who ate candy one to three times a month had the lowest mortality rates of the group, and researchers postulate this may be due to the antioxidants in chocolate. A 2009 study also found that heart attack survivors who ate chocolate were less likely to die than those who went without. Stick to a one-ounce serving to get your fix without wrecking your waistline.

http://todayhealth.today.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/02/13/10389822-sweet-weird-ways-chocolate-keeps-you-healthy

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