



Dark Chocolate

In Brief

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Dark chocolate (*Theobroma cacao*) is made from the seed of the cacao tree. The higher the percentage of cacao solids in your chocolate, the greater the amount of antioxidants it contains. This includes the polyphenolic and methylxanthine compounds. More specifically, the polyphenolic flavonols (catechin, epicatechin, and procyanidins) may reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease by reducing blood pressure, cholesterol levels and insulin resistance. Dark chocolate may actually improve cognitive function. The flavonols in dark chocolate exert their positive health effects in several ways including increasing the production of nitric oxide which in turn may reduce endothelial dysfunction, lipoprotein oxidation, platelet aggregation and endothelial inflammation. Dark chocolate also contains fiber and minerals beneficial for vascular function.

The greatest health benefits of dark chocolate are seen above a concentration of 60% cocoa solids. One ounce of dark chocolate containing 60%-69% cacao solids has 165 calories, 11 g of fat, and 15 g of total carbohydrate. As the percent of dark chocolate reaches 70%, the calories increase to 170 per ounce, but with only 7 g of sugar and about 40 mg of caffeine.

Adverse effects

Chocolate can be contaminated with the heavy metal cadmium, which is a renal toxin. Consumer Lab.com independently tested 42 chocolate products for purity and found that many common chocolate brands have dangerous levels of cadmium. Dark chocolate bars having the highest flavonol content and lowest levels of cadmium are Endangered Species 88% cacao, Ghiardelli Intense Dark 86% cacao, and Lindt Excellence 90% cacao Supreme Dark.

Pearl to Know

Dark chocolate has a greater polyphenol and flavonol content than does tea. Dark chocolate increases blood flow to the heart and brain. White chocolate offers few of these benefits, and milk chocolate contains too much sugar. The key to getting the benefits from chocolate without the weight gain is to choose a high-quality dark chocolate that contains 60%-90% cacao and to limit portion size to 1 ounce per day.

References

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