



LOVE

Love and chocolate have long been associated. In celebration of Valentine's Day, the chocolate industry will rake in over a billion dollars in sales of the lovers' confection.

First discovered in Latin America, the Aztecs and the Mayans infused cacao with water and chilies to create a chocolate drink used in sacred ceremonies. It was prized as a source of energy, attraction and pleasure.* Columbus carried it with him when he returned to Europe where it remained a luxury for centuries. It was prized as a medicinal food not as a confectionery. It wasn't until it made its way to England and into the hands of Richard Cadbury that it was sold for mainstream consumption in the now familiar heart-shaped Valentine's Day box.

Heart-shaped boxes aside, chocolate, and more specifically dark chocolate, is touted to have many health promoting properties. It is believed to protect against heart disease by lowering both blood pressure and LDL ("bad") cholesterol. Before you storm the door at Godiva, let's explore what it is about dark chocolate that led to its healthy reputation.

To be clear, it is dark -- not milk or white chocolate. Milk and white chocolate typically contain more milk and sugar and are more heavily processed. The processing destroys the antioxidant activity for which dark chocolate is favored. Antioxidants are substances that protect tissues from oxidative damage (think rust). Antioxidants occur in many nutrients such as Vitamins A, C and E. They are found to work best "in concert" rather than in isolation. This makes the many found in fruits and vegetables ideal. The antioxidants in chocolate are called flavonoids. Numerous studies demonstrate a strong inverse correlation between heart disease and the consumption of foods containing flavonoids. Because dark chocolate is one of the foods richest in flavonoids, one could conclude that it is associated with a reduced risk for heart disease.

The science tells us that under certain conditions this is in fact true. It is true for very small doses of dark chocolate. The benefits are immediate, but not long lasting. There is no conclusive proof that large or sustained intakes have the same or an amplified effect. So yes, dark chocolate in small infrequent doses is actually good for you. Eating it often or in large quantities does not increase the effect. If it is high quality chocolate such as Belgian, French or Swiss with 70% cacao or greater, a little bit goes a long way. It is just about impossible to eat more than just a taste. It is just too intense.

So, go ahead and celebrate Valentine's Day by enjoying a small amount of dark chocolate. Share it with someone you love and be sure to appreciate the flutter of positive emotions that accompany it.

**Scientists have since linked these effects to the chemical phenylethylamine in chocolate.*