



Your Health

Chocolate Does A Man's Heart Good

Steven Reinberg for HealthDayNews 03.02.06, 12:30 AM ET

New York - Chocolate lovers, take heart: Dutch research suggests that eating or drinking cocoa appears to lower blood pressure and even reduce the death risks for older men.

Since the 1700s, cocoa has been associated with healthy hearts, but only recently has scientific evidence backed up these claims, according to a new report in the Feb. 27 issue of the *Archives of Internal Medicine*.

According to the study, cocoa contains flavan-3-ols, which have been linked to lower blood pressure and improved function of the cells lining the blood vessels.

In their study, researchers led by **Brian Buijsse**, of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, in Bilthoven, examined links between cocoa and cardiovascular health in 470 men aged 65 to 84 years. The men had physical examinations and were interviewed about their diet at the start of the study in 1985 and then again in 1990 and 1995.

The researchers found that over a 15-year period, men who ate cocoa--including chocolate--regularly had significantly lower blood pressure compared with those who didn't.

The sweet treat might even help ward off death. The researchers reported that 314 men died over the course of the study, with 152 of those deaths blamed on heart disease. Men who consumed the highest amount of cocoa were half as likely to die from cardiovascular disease, compared to men who ate little or no cocoa, the team found. In addition, men who ate the most cocoa were less likely to die from any causes.

For these men, the risk remained low even after taking into account other factors, such as weight, smoking, physical activity, calorie intake and drinking alcohol, the researchers found.

The researchers believe that the lowered death risk didn't stem so much from lowered blood pressure, as from other heart-healthy benefits linked to flavan-3-ols. And since cocoa is rich in antioxidants, it may also protect against other diseases linked to oxidative stress, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and certain types of cancer, the researchers speculated.

One expert said the study helps confirm the use of cocoa as part of a healthful diet.

"Cocoa is the most concentrated source of bioflavonoid antioxidants readily available in our diets," said **Dr. David L. Katz**, an associate professor of public health, and director of the Prevention Research Center at Yale University School of Medicine.

"An accumulating body of evidence suggests that this translates into health benefits for those who consume cocoa or dark chocolate with a cocoa content of 60% or more. Benefits have been seen in endothelial function, a measure of blood vessel health, blood pressure, insulin levels and serum lipids," added Katz, author of *The Flavor Point Diet*.

The evidence is now very consistent that cocoa has health-promoting effects, Katz said.

"However, it is almost certainly dose-dependent," he added, cautioning that there's a calorie-rich downside to excessive cocoa consumption. "Cocoa comes in foods that tend to be energy-dense, and the harm of excess calories could readily offset the benefit of antioxidants."

And he stressed that cocoa's heart-healthy benefits only come from bittersweet dark chocolate and in concentrated cocoa beverages, which contain an effective dose of antioxidants, along with magnesium, arginine and fiber.

"This is not the case for milk chocolate, which contains potentially harmful saturated fats, or candy bars that dilute cocoa with a long list of other ingredients," Katz said.

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