

Did You Know?

February is the month for lovers, romance and CHOCOLATE!

Melting in the mouth with sweetness, seductive fragrant, smooth and luscious on the tongue, chocolate is, for many, the quintessential romantic gift for Valentine's Day. The value of chocolate has long been recognized. The Aztecs used a cocoa beverage in religious ceremonies and the beans as currency. In our modern health-conscious culture, chocolate has been saddled with a bad reputation. Recent research suggests that the news about chocolate is not all bad.

Because chocolate has been around for so long it is surprising that many myths have been established surrounding this food. Contrary to what some believe, chocolate is not high in caffeine. In fact, the amount of caffeine in a typical 1.4 ounce chocolate bar is about equivalent to that found in a cup of decaffeinated coffee. Also dentists now agree, the cavity causing potential of food is not necessarily related to its sugar content, but rather to how often a food is eaten and the amount of time the food remains in the mouth. Other carbohydrates such as bread, pasta, and fruit juices are as likely to cause cavities as chocolate candy. Medical research has also proven that chocolate can no longer be blamed for acne or hyperactive behavior.

Chocolate is high in saturated fatty acids and sugar which makes it a high calorie food. But multiple pieces of research have documented that chocolate does not have an ill effect on blood cholesterol levels. In fact there seems to be some benefit because while consuming chocolate does not raise the LDL cholesterol (bad cholesterol) it does increase the HDL cholesterol (good cholesterol). Chocolate, especially dark chocolate, also contains relatively high amounts of phenolic compounds, which possess antioxidant properties. Antioxidants have been strongly associated with reducing the risk of coronary heart disease and some cancers.

Other studies have shown that chocolate is the single most craved food in the country. Women in particular describe strong desires for chocolate in association with their menstrual cycle. Experts are actively conducting research to determine causes of cravings. Chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters are known to affect one's mood and desire for different types of foods. Serotonin and endorphins are two of the better-understood neurotransmitters. Serotonin is thought to help people feel calm and relaxed. It is believed that low levels of serotonin lead to cravings for starches and for sweet foods like chocolate. This is because foods high in carbohydrates boost serotonin levels in the brain and cause a return in the feeling of well-being. Similarly endorphins are "feel good" neurotransmitters that appear to be affected by fat intake. Thus consuming a high fat food like chocolate possibly induces the mood elevation that comes with higher brain levels of endorphins.

Of course, the swirl of clinical opinions matters little when it comes to pleasing your sweetheart. The bottom line is that chocolate is not the great evil that many people thought and may actually be better for us than we have ever realized. Certainly your daily diet should not treat chocolate as one of the major food groups. But occasionally to indulge in moderate amounts is not a bad thing. With drug and alcohol abuse rampant in our culture, if you're going to step up to a bar, why not make it a chocolate bar.

LET GO OF THE GUILT!