

Nutrition Guru

Welcome to Nutrition Guru - August 2003

- This is Nutrition Guru - a newsletter designed for people wanting to know more about nutrition and related health issues.
- The feature topic this month is 'Chocolate'.

Your input is welcome - I would really like your feedback, questions and topic suggestions!

Please send in your ideas for future topics to the editor:

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You can also contact me if you want references, further information & resources about topics discussed.

AAAAh yes - chocolate, chocolate, chocolate!

Cacao, the unprocessed cocoa bean from the plant *Theobroma cacao*, originated deep in the equatorial rain forests of the Americas. Historically, cacao was viewed as magical and mystical. It played an important role in early meso-American cultures, and had many uses ranging from a medication to a currency. Over the centuries, the use of cacao has evolved to what we now know as chocolate. Even in the 17th Century it was seen as important for strengthening the heart and for the treatment of heart pain.

We are still self-medicating with chocolate today - often in the form of 'non-hungry eating' - treating ourselves when feeling down, to give ourselves a lift, to boost our energy levels etc. Eating chocolate triggers the same chemical response in the brain as powerful anti-anxiety drugs like Prozac and Zoloft. Eaten in this way, like any other food, it can be a contributor to gaining excess weight. Yet the more we deny ourselves, the stronger the deprivation induced craving we have - then of course we go too far and eat too much! What's the solution? Learn a range of ways to respond to feeling down or stressed, and make sure you get adequate sleep and regular meals so you don't get low in energy - that way you can stick to eating chocolate purely for the pleasure of it.

Chocolate (and cocoa) contain various beneficial plant chemicals (phytochemicals). They are naturally occurring, plant produced, chemicals. Flavonoids, are the particular type of antioxidant phytochemical found in cocoa and chocolate. Antioxidants are believed to protect the body against "free-radicals", which contribute to chronic disease.

Foods that have been identified as having a high flavonoid antioxidant content include many fruits and vegetables such as apples and onions, teas (green and black), red wines and certain chocolates.

Cocoa and chocolate contribute to trace mineral intake, which is necessary for optimum functioning of all biologic systems. Certain chocolates can provide significant amounts of a number of essential nutrients such as the minerals iron, calcium, magnesium and zinc, and the vitamins riboflavin, niacin and thiamine.

People who have had, or want to prevent, cardiovascular risk often ask about how much chocolate is ok. Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a major issue in our industrialised world and numerous studies support the concept that regular consumption of foods and beverages rich in antioxidant vitamins and flavonoids is associated with a decreased risk of CVD.

The fat content of chocolate is high, however, one third of the fat in cocoa butter is composed of the saturated fat stearic acid (35%), which neither raises nor lowers serum cholesterol (it is neither 'good' nor 'bad'). However, it also contains saturated fat (palmitic 25% which does raise 'bad' LDL-Cholesterol), and polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fats. Fifty grams of chocolate per day in place of a high carbohydrate snack in one study did not adversely 'bad' LDL- cholesterol levels in people following a heart healthy diet. Thus, the inclusion of a moderate amount of chocolate containing stearic acid into the diet is not predicted to have adverse effects on cholesterol, as long as the total fat and energy intake is held constant (so long as you are not eating more energy in total as a result and gaining weight).

Like all high fat foods, chocolate was never meant to be eaten in large amounts.

Chocolate Cravings

Humans, it seems, crave both sugar and fat. And while in the past this may have had survival value, it now represents a risk for several kinds of disease. Not only is it amongst the most craved foods, it is now one of the most easily obtained. However, it is now believed that people who crave chocolate probably do so because they have conditioned themselves to eat chocolate when hungry and therefore recognise hunger as a signal for chocolate rather than other foods. The good news is that chocolate craving may be avoided - by eating chocolate for enjoyment, rather than to satisfy hunger. Sounds like a good idea to me!!!



Dietitian Dr Rosemary Stanton explains to chronic dieters how to eat chocolate for enjoyment:

- Many dieters have lists of forbidden foods, often labelled as 'bad' food - as if it could harm you, or turn you into a 'bad' person just by eating them - and chocolate is often on that list. The list of 'bad' food tends to grow over time, severely limiting your ability to have an enjoyable diet, of which variety is an important part. Often these so-called 'bad' foods can give us lots of pleasure; they may be foods used to help us celebrate milestones (birthday cake for example), or they just taste fantastic. Unfortunately food bans create an exaggerated yearning; they induce artificial cravings - and this leads to overeating or bingeing.
- It is important to learn to live with all food - you can't live without it and you can't avoid it. Legalising food means recognising food as just food, and leaving the moralising about 'good' and 'bad' out of it. Once you allow yourself to have it, you will want considerably less. The following exercise is designed to help you learn how to live with your previously 'forbidden' or 'bad' foods. If you want, insert some other food instead of chocolate cake.
 - The next time you want some particular food, such as chocolate cake, allow yourself to have it.
 - Don't settle for any old chocolate cake, biscuit, etc - search out the very best chocolate cake, biscuit, etc you can find. This removes the instantaneous gobbling effect of eating something just because it is there.

- When you find a slice of chocolate cake (don't make one unless you have plenty of people to share it with, or you will end up eating the whole thing), sit down and eat it slowly. Enjoy every mouthful and allow yourself the full delight of its richness. Take in the aroma, linger your gaze upon its richness, moistness and texture, 'Ooh' and 'Aah' at its fabulous flavour and gorgeous texture.
 - If you take this attitude, you will find that the chocolate cake, biscuit, etc is much more satisfying than the piece you guiltily gobble down quickly.
- Having allowed yourself a scrumptious piece of chocolate cake or biscuit, and knowing that at some time in the future you can have another similar experience, you can get on with the rest of your life's activities - and you can do so without the burden of believing you are not a 'bad' person for eating 'bad' food.
- When you do not forbid chocolate cake, biscuits etc, it is much easier to see it as one small, and enjoyable part of your life. When it is forbidden, the desire to sneak a piece becomes overriding. When you eat guiltily, you tend to continue craving the food because you have had no satisfaction from it.

From: The Diet Dilemma by Rosemary Stanton

What about carob?

Touted as the dream chocolate substitute, carob, in its natural state, is a brown leathery pod that grows on the locust bean (or carob) tree. These pods contain virtually no fat and have a sweet slightly chocolate taste. Carob powder is used in baked goods instead of cocoa powder and both fresh carob and carob powder can be bought from health food shops. BUT ... to achieve that luxurious, creamy and uniquely sensual mouth-feel of chocolate, carob is usually mixed with fat. Carob bars are therefore high in fat and no better for you than chocolate.

The experts at Haigh's Chocolates also have some advice - on taste testing for good quality chocolate:

1. Allow the scents of the chocolate to seduce you for a few moments before sliding a piece into your mouth. Hunt its secrets. The chocolate should be perfumed with a hint of its accompanying vanilla, be neither too bitter nor cloyingly sweet (where you tire of the excessive sweetness).
2. You should hear the chocolate snap as you break the bar or crack when you bite it.
3. The surface should be shiny with no hint of streaking. When snapped, the broken surface should be craggy. This shows a high content of the crystalline, brittle cocoa butter and careful technique. While milk chocolate should still have good color and depth, dark chocolate should be richly colored with a hint of mahogany.
4. Cocoa butter is solid at 33 degrees and melts at 34 degrees. This means that good chocolate with a high cocoa butter content will feel dry and cool at first touch but will begin to melt almost immediately. Check this by placing a small amount in your hand, or better still on your tongue. It should leave a clean, non-greasy finish in the mouth.
5. As the chocolate melts, check for texture or 'mouth-feel'. It should be neither coarse gritty, nor too fine and slimy.
6. Place a small piece on your tongue and allow it to melt. You may also like to scrape it with your lower teeth and allow it to settle beneath your tongue. Chocolate has a unique taste. The flavour should be full and lingering. Check for balance of sweet to bitter. There will be an element of fruitiness and acidity to lift the heavier flavours. Check the vanilla element. Artificial vanilla will be cloying (so rich you tire of it readily).
7. If in doubt start again.



For those of you who have or know someone with diabetes, take note! Chocolate is a low GI (GI 49) food, and carbohydrates from chocolate will thus be delivered slowly into the blood-stream - blood glucose levels will not rise sharply. This means it is quite OK for people with diabetes to have real chocolate (preferably dark chocolate for its antioxidant components). Everyone, including people with diabetes can eat real chocolate. Chocolate is a 'sometimes' food, so if you like it you should have it sometimes, and enjoy it without guilt.

I thought you might enjoy a chocolate recipe after reading all this!

Chocolate and Almond Cake

You will need:

150g dark chocolate
90g butter or margarine
75g caster sugar
4 eggs, separated
90g ground almonds



You will need to:

Melt the chocolate and butter together (saucepan or microwave)
Hold back 1 tbsp of sugar. Beat together the remaining sugar and the egg yolks until thick and creamy
Stir in the chocolate mixture, then the almonds
Pour into a well-greased and floured cake tin (20cm)
Bake in a low to moderate oven (175 degrees Celsius for about 45 minutes)
Use as a cake or as a dessert served with cream and possibly red berries.

