

Sweet News for Chocolate Lovers in Andrew County

From kisses to hearts, chocolate is the top treat every February. Although we crave chocolate for its great taste, it can also benefit our health.

Scientists have been studying the impact chocolate has on the body for the last decade. The good news for chocolate lovers in Andrew County is that chocolate has many positive effects on a person's heart and circulatory system.

"It has been shown to have a blood pressure lowering effect and can make arteries more elastic which is good," says Dr. Penny Kris-Etherton, professor of nutrition and a registered dietician at Penn State University. She has helped perform studies on chocolate and health.

Dr. Kris-Etherton, says that flavanoids are an important chemical in chocolate. Flavanoids are antioxidants that are found in many plants, such as onions, broccoli and tea. Flavanoids have been shown to lower blood glucose levels. High blood glucose levels can lead to diabetes, which raises the risk for heart disease.

Heart disease and stroke accounted for 32.4 percent of Missouri deaths in 2007. In Andrew County, 21 percent of adults suffer from high blood pressure. High blood pressure is a risk factor for heart disease and stroke. Missouri also falls behind many states in other risk factors, such as smoking and obesity.

These studies do not mean that people should stock up on their favorite candy bars. Not all chocolate is created equal. First, there are different levels of flavanoids in different chocolate products. These levels are not labeled on the wrapping. Dark chocolate is more likely than milk chocolate to contain flavanoids because of how it is processed. But Dr. Kris-Etherton says there are dark chocolates with low flavanoid counts and milk chocolates with high counts. There is simply no good way to tell, currently. In addition, most chocolate available is loaded with saturated fats and sugars.

Although flavanoid levels aren't listed on chocolate labels, the percentage of cacao is. This percentage refers to the total cacao content in the chocolate. This includes everything that comes from the cocoa bean, like cocoa butter and cocoa powder.

Products with around 60 percent cacao have been shown to have the best taste and health benefits. Also, more cacao in chocolate usually means less sugar. That is why bittersweet chocolate is typically less sweet than semisweet or milk chocolate.

Sugar contains no vitamins or minerals that help the body, and eating too much is unhealthy. The less sugar in chocolate, the better the health benefits. But even with the best chocolate, moderation is the key.

The next time the urge for chocolate strikes, the Mayo Clinic and Health Literacy Missouri suggest the following tips:

- Aim high. Choose dark chocolate with cacao content of 65 percent or higher.
- Eat a little. Limit yourself to no more than 3 ounces (85 grams) a day, which is the amount shown in studies to be helpful for health.
- Move more. Three ounces of chocolate may provide up to 450 calories so you may want to cut calories in other areas or exercise more to compensate.

For more information about healthy eating, call the Show Me Nutrition Line at 1-888-515-0016.

What's in your bar?



Chocolate bars and kisses abound, but what are you really eating?

Here are some words the label might use:

Cacao:

Can refer to the tree, pods and beans. On a label, it often expresses a percent.

% Cacao:

This percent tells you how much cacao bean solid is present.
The more cacao in the bar, the less sugar it has.

Chocolate Liquor:

This is the product of the ground cacao bean. There is no alcohol present.
It is the mix of ground or melted beans into cocoa butter and cocoa solids.

Cocoa Butter:

This is the natural fat from the ground bean. It has saturated and unsaturated fats.

Cocoa Powder:

Made from cacao beans. Mostly used for baking or drinking.