



Chocolate: facts and fiction

Most people enjoy chocolate and will indulge over Easter. It may taste good, but what about chocolate's effect on health. Here are some facts about chocolate that you may not know.

Chocolate and saturated fats

While chocolate contains some saturated fats, studies have shown that not all types of saturated fats raise blood cholesterol levels. For example, stearic acid is a saturated fat that makes up one-third of the fat in chocolate. Stearic acid does not raise blood cholesterol levels. In addition, oleic acid, a monounsaturated fat also found in olive oil, makes up one-third of the fat in chocolate. Eating foods with oleic acid as part of a healthful eating plan has been shown to be beneficial for heart health.

Chocolate and caffeine

Chocolate contains very little caffeine.

Chocolate and polyphenols

Chocolate is made from cocoa beans which come from the cocoa tree *Theobroma cacao*. As a result, chocolate contains many of the same healthy compounds as plants, including minerals (copper, iron, Zinc and magnesium) and specific antioxidants called polyphenols. Polyphenols help lower LDL cholesterol.

Chocolate and allergies

Allergies to chocolate are very uncommon. If you have been diagnosed with food allergies by a board-certified allergist, you must read labels and avoid the foods or ingredients that cause the allergic reaction.

Chocolate and diabetes

Diabetes occurs when a person's body doesn't properly regulate blood sugars (blood glucose). Eating certain foods, even simpler sugar, does not cause diabetes. All people with diabetes should follow their physicians' and dietitians' instructions for meal planning, physical activity, blood glucose monitoring, and medication. So, if you have diabetes, ask your health professional how to incorporate chocolate into your eating plan.

Chocolate and headaches

Research shows that most headaches and chocolate intake are not related. Experts agree that most often it is stress, irregular sleep patterns, hunger, and hormone changes that trigger headaches.

Chocolate and tooth decay

Tooth decay happens when carbohydrates (both complex and simple) mix with natural bacteria in the mouth. This creates acid that breaks down the enamel on teeth. Chocolate, which contains carbohydrates, is no more or less responsible for tooth decay than other carbohydrate-containing foods like bread, raisins, crackers, and fruit. In fact, chocolate actually clears the mouth relatively quickly, reducing the time it spends in contact with the teeth.



Chocolate cravings

A recent study looked at why we crave chocolate and concluded that people do not become addicted to chocolate. Instead, the study found that people desire chocolate because they enjoy the sensation of eating it.

Chocolate and hyperactivity

Pediatricians say there is no link between the sugar found in chocolate or other foods and restlessness or attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children.

Chocolate and health – the bottom line

Remember that chocolate can fit into a healthy eating pattern. Be sure to eat a variety of foods. Enjoy chocolate in moderation to add flavour and pleasure to eating. Base your diet on the Food Pyramid.

**For advice about nutrition speak to a dietitian. Contact the Irish nutrition and dietetic institute (indi) at 01-2804839 or email info@indi.ie. Our website is www.indi.ie
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