

<https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/the-benefits-of-having-a-healthy-relationship-with-chocolate#:~:text=Increases%20heart%20health%3A%20The%20antioxidants,and%20death%20from%20heart%20disease.>

## The Benefits of Having a Healthy Relationship with Chocolate

If you'd characterize your relationship with chocolate as "complicated," you're not alone. About 45 percent of women in the U.S. report that they have chocolate cravings, with a whopping 91 percent of female college students reporting regular cravings for it. Research shows that, unlike men, many women have feelings of guilt when eating this potentially "forbidden" food, or they fight the urge to eat it at all.

This strained relationship with chocolate can be harmful in a number of ways. Nutrition experts explain how making up with chocolate can benefit not only your taste buds, but also your health.

### Why Chocolate Shouldn't Be Your Guilty Pleasure

A 2014 study showed that women who associated eating chocolate cake with celebration had more successful weight maintenance, while those who associated it with guilt were likely to encounter a number of problems, including:

- Less success at long- and short-term weight maintenance
- Feelings of helplessness and loss of control
- Unhealthy eating behaviors
- Greater body image dissatisfaction
- Reduced quality of life

A key in reversing the negative effects of these chocolate cravings is to stop making it taboo. You don't have to feel guilty about craving a food, whether it's chocolate or broccoli. In fact, labeling any food as completely off-limits usually results in increased cravings for that food and guilt when you eventually do eat it, the experts say.

Instead, try setting some terms of your relationship with chocolate. Savor it and enjoy it with purpose and intention, without the guilt. Don't sit in front of the TV with your hand in a bottomless bowl of chocolate candies. Instead, be mindful of when and why you are eating it. For instance, if you enjoy a square of dark chocolate every day, and you have weekend plans at a restaurant with a world-famous chocolate dessert, you might want to skip your daily treat so you can indulge on the weekend.

A healthy relationship with chocolate helps you enjoy it in moderation and without guilt, rather than cycling between trying to completely avoid it and then overdoing it.

## The Benefits of Having Your Chocolate and Eating It, Too

Having a healthy relationship with all foods is important for your mind and your body. But beginning or creating a balanced relationship with dark chocolate, in particular, may have a significantly positive impact on your overall health.

Dark chocolate contains powerful antioxidants. Among the most beneficial is a flavonol called epicatechin. Flavonols are compounds found in plants that fight inflammation and protect against cell damage caused by free radicals.

These are just a few of the ways research has shown that dark chocolate can benefit you:

1. **Increases heart health:** The antioxidants in dark chocolate have been shown to lower blood pressure, reduce the risk of clotting and increase blood circulation to the heart, thus lowering the risks of stroke, coronary heart disease and death from heart disease.
2. **Balances the immune system:** Flavonols prevent the immune system from going into overdrive and reduce oxidative stress, which is an imbalance caused by cells fighting against free radicals and a common cause of many diseases.
3. **Combats diabetes:** Epicatechin protects cells, makes them stronger and supports the processes that help the body to use insulin better, which might prevent or combat diabetes.
4. **Improves brain function:** Flavonols in dark chocolate have a positive impact on brain function, including better reaction time, visual-spatial awareness and stronger memory. Though research is ongoing, one reason for this may be that flavonols increase blood flow to the brain.
5. **Boosts athletic performance:** The epicatechin in dark chocolate increases the production of nitric oxide in the blood, which supports circulation and reduces the amount of oxygen an athlete uses while engaged in moderately intense exercise. This allows the athlete to maintain workout intensity for longer.
6. **Reduces stress:** People who ate dark chocolate reported that they felt less stressed, and researchers confirmed that after eating dark chocolate, there were reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol. This may be related to dark chocolate's effects on heart health, since stress is a risk factor for cardiovascular disease.

With its health-boosting compounds and micronutrients, you should consider letting dark chocolate into your life, if it's not a part of it already (it is important to note that dark chocolate contains caffeine, which some people may be sensitive to).

Here are some facts about dark chocolate's health benefits:

- The higher the cocoa content, the more beneficial flavonols the chocolate contains. Most of the benefits seen in research are associated with chocolate that has at least a 70% cacao content.
- Researchers have not come up with a hard and fast recommendation of how much dark chocolate should be consumed to achieve these health benefits. Experts recommend minimally processed dark chocolate with at least 70 percent cacao content, and maybe have an ounce as an occasional treat.

- You should always check the label to be aware of the calorie, fat and sugar content, which could potentially affect the overall health benefit.
- For some people, chocolate can trigger acid reflux or migraines.

In the end, indulging in an occasional chocolate treat shouldn't be fraught with stress or guilt, whether it is antioxidant-rich dark chocolate or white chocolate, which has very little nutritional benefit. As in most healthy relationships, the key is to maintain a positive and balanced outlook.

Dark chocolate has many health benefits and can definitely be enjoyed as part of a balanced diet. There are many healthy ways to incorporate chocolate into your lifestyle, so find what works for you.

If you need some additional help or have trouble controlling what you eat, consider seeking help from a registered dietitian, nutritionist or other qualified health professional.