



**KATHY
KOLASA**

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Benefits of dark chocolate

Q My girlfriend is a health nut, but I really want to give her some chocolate for Valentines. Is it ok? MK, Greenville

A Kathryn Clary, a Brody medical student, suggests that dark chocolate really can prevent a broken heart with its benefits to the cardiovascular system. Here is what she wants you to know for Valentines and every day.

On Valentine's Day, we celebrate love — love for a partner, love for yourself, and what better way to celebrate love than with a delicious box of chocolates? If you are a chocolate lover, you will be delighted over this scrumptious finding: research suggests that dark chocolate may be good for your love muscle — the heart. The cocoa in dark chocolate naturally contains anti-oxidants, protecting your heart and blood vessels from damage and disease.

Although cocoa has its health benefits, not all chocolate is healthy. Some milk chocolate is processed in a way that removes the heart-healthy ingredients in the cocoa. So, it is dark chocolate you want to share.

Before you devour that candy bar, remember that chocolate candy often contains added sugars and saturated fats — not heart healthy. Using the Nutrition Facts label on the package can help you choose your chocolate. First, start with the serving size to know how many servings are in the package. Look at the saturated fat that the American Heart Association (AHA) recommends limiting to 13 grams per day. Look at the added sugars (under "Total Carbohydrate"). AHA recommends limiting added sugar to 25 grams per day for women and 36 grams for men. Consider the other foods you plan on eating

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that day to stray below the limits. Foods like butter and red meat have saturated fat. Soda and salad dressings can have added sugars.

So now you've bitten into a dark chocolate that is low in sugar and high in cocoa content — what exactly is happening inside your body to boost heart health? First, blood vessels dilate and get bigger after eating dark chocolate making more room for your blood inside the vessel and lowering the pressure inside the vessel or your blood pressure. It's like putting your thumb over

the end of a garden hose. When your thumb blocks part of the opening, the water sprays out faster and harder because it has a smaller hole to flow through (a smaller opening creates a higher pressure inside the hose). When you release your thumb, the opening is bigger, and the water flows more easily through the opening (lowering the pressure in the hose). When your blood vessels dilate, this is like taking your thumb off the opening of the hose — it gives blood a bigger opening to flow through and lowers the pressure inside the vessel, which causes less stress on the inside of the vessel wall (which is good!).

Second, dark chocolate has good effects on cholesterol. Your "good" or HDL-C is similar to a clean-up crew — it picks up cholesterol from around your body and brings it back to the liver, where it is sent out of the body. LDL-C is messy — creating plaques on the inside of vessels and arteries. When plaque builds up, the vessel gets smaller on the inside (like a thumb over a garden hose). Studies have found that dark chocolate helps increase the level of the HDL and decrease the LDL plaque-makers — both good things for your vessels.

Third, dark chocolate has anti-inflammatory effects. You know that feeling when you think you've ducked your head low enough while getting into the car, but instead, you end up knocking your head? And then a few minutes later, you can feel the warm lump rising on the back of your head? That is inflammation — your body's natural response to injury or infection. In many cases, inflammation is a good thing, helping to heal the damaged body part, and getting rid of the germs causing the common cold. Once the damage has been healed or the infection has been cleared, the swelling and inflammation is supposed to go away.

Remember the artery plaques from the messy LDL? Your body's inflammatory cells see these plaques and can tell that this vessel doesn't look normal and healthy, and so the cells react just as they do to anything else in your body that doesn't seem healthy — they try to heal it through inflammation. But the plaque isn't going anywhere and your cells keep trying, and so inflammation becomes chronic and long-lasting, causing further damage to the vessel wall.

The flavonoids in dark chocolate help control the amount of inflammation and stop the cells from releasing chemicals that damage the vessel wall.

So, dark chocolate has some surprising health benefits not found in other candies. When eaten in small amounts, may be a heart-healthy way to satisfy your sweet tooth this Valentine's and every day. Check with your doctor about any diet or food changes you want to make since health needs are very individual. Learn more about the new label, visit <https://www.heart.org/en/healthy-living/healthy-eating/eat-smart>.

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