

### **Chocolate – a sin or a saint?**

Chocolate is the word used to describe products made from beans of the cocoa tree.

Chocolate beans are dried and processed seeds of the yellow-green pods hanging from the trunk and stems of the cocoa tree in equatorial America, Africa and Asia. Although chocolate has been around since Columbus' time, the English company Fry is known for making the first eating chocolate in 1847.

Chocolate generally has a bad name, a reputation as being fattening, tooth decaying and generally unhealthy. A definite big no-no to any dieter.

Chocolate connoisseurs treat fine chocolate like wine. There is more to chocolate than grabbing a vending machine bar as a quick fix on a bad day. Producing fine chocolate is an art, with taste mainly being influenced by the polyphenol (an antioxidant) content. Unfortunately, the principle ingredient of commercial mass-produced bars is not chocolate or cocoa solids, but sugar, powdered milk and many other additives. Mass produced chocolate generally contains less cocoa solids, as low as 7%, with most or all of the cocoa butter being replaced by vegetable oil or other fat. These are the dietary villains responsible for chocolate's bad reputation.

The chocolate making process starts by harvesting the cocoa pods containing cocoa beans. The cocoa beans are pulped, fermented, dried, roasted and graded. The end product is cocoa liquor, cocoa butter and cocoa solids (the powder). The kernels (nib) of the cocoa bean are very high in fat. The cocoa liquor and cocoa mass is blended back with cocoa butter in varying quantities to make different types of chocolate. The finest plain or dark chocolate should contain 70 % of cocoa solids, whereas Milk chocolate contains 30% or more cocoa solids and the best White chocolate contains 25 % or more cocoa butter (White chocolate contains no cocoa solids).

Chocolate contains a sweetener, usually sugar, because without some kind of sweetener, chocolate would be very bitter and virtually inedible. Other commonly added ingredients are natural Vanilla or artificial Vanilla (Vanillin) for flavour. Many other flavours and tastes are mixed in with chocolate, which compliment the taste e.g. orange, nuts, cognac, coffee etc.

Is chocolate good for you?

Chocolate is calorie dense. A 100-gram strip of chocolate contains about 500 calories, 8 grams of protein and 30 grams of fat. A typical chocolate bar could contain 220 calories, about 40 percent of which come from fat.

Some chocolate bars give a woman nearly a quarter of her recommended daily calorie intake in just a few mouthfuls.

Dark chocolate will soon be announced as a superfood. The possible health benefits of chocolate come from the polyphenols. Recent studies have demonstrated the anti-oxidative effects of polyphenols in chocolate on LDL-cholesterol – the 'bad' cholesterol found in the blood stream. High levels of LDL-cholesterol are linked to increased risk of heart disease. Studies have also suggested that chocolate may inhibit blood clot formation, a bit like aspirin.

The chocolate you should go for is the rich, dark chocolate with 70% cocoa solids and low levels of cocoa butter.

Remember, everything in moderation. Subjects involved in the above mentioned studies consumed only one or two squares of chocolate a day and not 7 chocolate bars a week.