

The bright side of dark chocolate

Dating back to around 2000 BC, the chocolate we know and see today used to be consumed as a fermented drink with spices and wine. The chocolate we see neatly stacked in stores is the end result of numerous steps on the cacao pod. Seeds are extracted and roasted which then form coco beans. These are then separated to get cocoa nibs and grounded to form the chocolate liquor or cocoa powder we use so extensively.

Consuming pure cocoa is not always possible; plus, one might prefer to add in milk and sometimes sugar, but when done excessively, it ruins all the good properties cocoa has. While dark chocolate has 50 to 90 percent cocoa with minimum cocoa butter and sugar, milk chocolate contains only 10 to 50 percent of cocoa.

Nutrition count

Dark chocolate is flooded with nutrients like iron, magnesium, copper, manganese, potassium, zinc, phosphorous and selenium.

A better heart

Flavanols are plant chemicals found in cocoa which help reduce chances of heart diseases. In dark chocolate, the concentrations of flavanols are 2 to 3 times higher than in milk chocolate, making it good for your heart. Flavanols act on the overall health of the heart by relaxing the blood vessels and improving the blood flow, which eventually lowers the blood pressure. Cocoa powder also decreases oxidised LDL, which is bad for the body as it damages tissues and linings in the arteries of the heart.

Lowering diabetes risk

Flavanols also increase the insulin sensitivity in the short run, and helps reduce the risk of diabetes in the long run.

Antioxidant rich

Dark chocolate or cocoa have been found to have the most antioxidants, lab tests reveal. Not even fruits that we know to be high in antioxidants like berries have

those as much as dark chocolate does.

These antioxidants help fight numerous toxins in the body like bad bacteria, free radicals, cancerous cells and help relieve stress as well. In the long run, it helps to slow down the skin's ageing process and strengthens the immune system.

Sun protection

Bioactive compounds like flavanols in dark chocolate increase blood flow to the skin and hydrate it. MED is the minimal erythral dose, which is the level of UVB rays that cause skin redness in 24 hours. A study revealed the MED level doubled in people once they consumed dark chocolate for 12 weeks. The flavanols help to increase the MED and keep the skin healthy and protected from the sun.

Increased brain function

Cocoa high in flavanols also improve blood flow to the brain. This helps to improve cognitive function and is a great treatment for the elderly who face troubles thinking or have mental impairments. Also, because it contains caffeine, it shows immediate results in the short run as well.

Better oral health

While milk chocolate can cause cavities with its high sugar contents, dark chocolate does quite the opposite with its high theobromine content. Theobromine is a compound that fights bacteria and tooth decay and helps you achieve a better oral health.

Cough treatment

The theobromine found in dark chocolate is also helpful in subduing coughs. It helps to control the cough and the inflammation in the throat which causes uneasiness.

The don'ts

Even with an array of benefits, nothing is

good when done in excess. The same goes for dark chocolate as well. Being very calorie rich, it can cause one to gain weight if consumed in large amounts. To get the best of its benefits without gaining weight, consume a healthy amount of 6 grams daily, as stated by Harvard Health.

What to buy

When purchasing dark chocolate, get ones that have at least 70 percent dark chocolate. These will have most flavanols. Dark chocolate is not meant to contain



any milk at all, but cross contamination often results in bits of it. Butter fat, vegetable oils and artificial flavours and colours are ingredients one should be watching out for as they make the chocolate impure.

Store it in a cool and dry place as this will extend its life for up to 2 whole years. Refrigerating will cause a bloom, which is simply the sugar raising to the top. This does not affect the taste or benefits, but does not look pleasant.

Dark chocolate meals

We cannot consume it in bulk for it is full of calories, and because of its bitterness. One can melt a few cubes and drizzle the chocolate over biscuits, pudding or oatmeal to keep it all healthy. This is one way to incorporate it. Recipes too are available by the loads if you want to incorporate it further.

SALTED DARK CHOCOLATE PEANUT BUTTER CUPS

Ingredients

11.5 ounce bag extra dark chocolate baking chips, divided
4 tsp coconut oil, divided (you may substitute with butter)
½ cup creamy peanut butter
Flaky sea salt, for sprinkling

Method

Place paper or foil liners in the cavities of a standard muffin tin. Fill a large sauté pan with 2 inches of water and bring to a simmer for your double boiler. Place half of the chocolate chips and 2 teaspoons of coconut oil in a heatproof bowl. Place the bowl of chocolate into the simmering water and stir until melted. Using a cookie scoop, evenly divide the chocolate between each liner and rap on the counter a few times to evenly distribute over the bottom of the liner. Freeze for 15 minutes.

Heat the peanut butter in the microwave for just a few seconds to soften slightly and make it spreadable (if necessary). Using a cookie scoop or teaspoon, divide between each liner and spread over the top of the chocolate layer. Melt the remaining chocolate and coconut oil in your double boiler using the same heatproof bowl. Divide evenly among the liners and rap on the counter until the chocolate covers the peanut butter layer. Sprinkle with the flaky sea salt and chill in the freezer for 15-20 minutes or in the refrigerator until set.

Enjoy!

(If you prefer to use a dark chocolate bar, coarsely chop it before placing it the double boiler with the coconut oil. If you'd like a softer peanut butter cup, leave it out at room temp for just a few minutes before eating.)

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Recipe and photo: Collected

