

5 Delicious Ways to Enjoy the Benefits of Chocolate

Oh chocolate - loved and feared so much that some people refer to themselves as *chocoholics*! Whether you enjoy chocolate for its fabulous flavors and mouth feel or for its health benefits, it is important to realize that more isn't necessarily better. Keep these tips in mind to get the most out of any chocolate experience.

1. Go to the dark side of the chocolate aisle.

It's all about the flavonoids, antioxidant compounds that can help your heart in several ways, including lowering blood pressure and improving cholesterol levels. There are more flavonoids in dark and baking chocolate than in milk or Dutch chocolate. Some products now list the amount of cacao on the package. Higher percentages are better.

2. Enjoy chocolate after a balanced meal.

While the health benefits of flavonoids are real, no chocolate product is nutrient-rich. Chocolate is not a good protein source like lean meats nor is it packed with vitamins and minerals like fruits, veggies, whole grains, and low-fat dairy foods. Your best bet is to enjoy chocolate **after** a meal that includes something from each of those food groups.

3. Be size-wise about chocolate servings.

Many studies have concluded that a piece of dark chocolate a day - a very small piece - can help keep the doctor away. No matter how dark the chocolate, a king-size candy bar is not a smart choice, because it is high in calories, fat, and sugar. Look for small, individual portions (about 1/4 oz. each) or divide a large bar into very small pieces.

4. Combine chocolate with fruit and nuts.

Here's a heart-smart way to have your chocolate and multiply your health benefits too! Enjoy the rich, creamy flavors of dark chocolate with nutrient-rich fruits (blueberries, strawberries, or pears, for example) and nuts (like almonds or peanuts). Create these combos in desserts or make a snack mix with dried fruit, nuts, and dark chocolate bits.

5. Savor every chocolate bite completely.

When we slow down and truly savor our meals and snacks, we can be satisfied with smaller quantities. When it comes to eating, enjoyment involves several senses: smelling aromas, feeling textures, and tasting the wide variety of flavors. When we give chocolate the attention it deserves, that very small piece can be just the right size!