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University of Missouri Extension
Northwest Region

For More Information Contact:
Janet M. Hackert,
Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

Dark Chocolate and Cocoa – Healthy Treat in Moderation

*By Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition and Health Education Specialist
University of Missouri Extension*

The holidays often involve sweet treats, including chocolate. Research shows that the flavanols in dark chocolate and cocoa may have health benefits, but only if consumed in moderation.

Dark chocolate and cocoa contain a greater amount of plant-based nutrients, or phytonutrients, called flavanols than do other forms of chocolate. In fact, these compounds have a bitter flavor and give the darker chocolates and straight cocoa their characteristic taste.

Past research has indicated that cocoa flavanols help in heart health; more recent research expands those findings to possible brain health benefits. In both cases, the phytonutrients, “positively affect the circulatory system and help maintain the flexibility of the arteries,” according to the November 2013 issue of Tufts University Nutrition and Health Letter. In one study, the researchers found that older adults with hypertension and/or diabetes drinking two cups of cocoa each day for a month improved in both brain function and increased blood flow to the brain. Researchers at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston found that for a small group of subjects with impaired function, average age 73, increased daily intake of cocoa improved their cognitive skills significantly.

So does this mean to eat a box of chocolates for good health every day? Of course not. But moderate quantities of dark chocolate or cocoa may be beneficial for some. Although there is no recommended amount that has been suggested by the research, those in the field propose limiting consumption to about an ounce per day. For example, that would be about four dark chocolate kisses or a cup of cocoa made from cocoa powder. Keep in mind, though, that along with the flavanol-packed cocoa in the candy or hot drink, typically there is also a good bit of fat, sugar and other less healthy components.

Choose darker types of chocolate for heart and brain health benefits. And while you are at it, continue to make other heart-healthy choices including getting plenty of fruits and vegetables daily, selecting low-fat or nonfat dairy foods, and lean meats combined with daily physical activity.

For more information on the benefits and limitations of cocoa and dark chocolate, or any other topic, contact me, Janet Hackert, Regional Nutrition Specialist, at 660-425-6434 or HackertJ@missouri.edu or your local University of Missouri Extension office.