

## LIFESTYLES WITH SYLVIA



Dear Friends,

As I'm sure you all noticed, January was a pretty busy month here at the SRC: the classes were hopping, the machines were humming and the parking lot was consistently full! I wasn't surprise though, and I doubt any of you were either—after all, January is when we're most motivated to fulfill our New Year's resolutions and get down to the business of starting fresh and staying healthy.

Now the big question: as we ease on into February, can we keep it up? I like to think so, but it will be a whole lot easier if we reward ourselves for the progress we've made so far and find a smart way to keep ourselves motivated moving forward.

So... how about some chocolate?

Nope, you didn't read that wrong, I did indeed say chocolate. Believe it or not, if you're careful about the type and quantity of chocolate you consume, eating chocolate comes with a number of fantastic health benefits. Plus, chocolate might as well be the official sweet treat of February (would Valentine's Day really be a holiday without it?), so I think it's fitting to devote this month's column to such a delicious indulgence, don't you? As Louis Lewin wrote, "The beverage of the gods was Ambrosia: that of man is chocolate. Both increase the length of life in a prodigious manner."

### **Cocoa to the Rescue!**

Chocolate in its most basic form comes from cocoa, and you may be surprised to find out that raw cocoa has the highest antioxidant value of all the natural foods in the world.

Cornell University food scientists have found that cocoa powder has nearly twice the antioxidants found in red wine and up to three times those found in green tea. Recent research has also shown a link between cocoa and cardiovascular health, including reduced risk of blood clots, strokes and heart attacks as well as healthy blood flow and pressure. To top it all off, cocoa supports the creation of serotonin, which helps keep us from feeling depressed, and contains phenylethylamine (PEA), which helps elevate our mental alertness and concentration.

I know what you're thinking, though: isn't chocolate fattening? The truth is that the fats found in cocoa butter are healthy fats. Cocoa contains oleic acid, a heart healthy monounsaturated fat that is believed to raise the level of the "good cholesterol" known as HDL cholesterol. In fact, thanks to its appetite-suppressant properties, cocoa can actually help you lose weight and is often added to weight loss products to help control hunger—if that doesn't make cocoa a super food, I don't know what else could!

### **Healthy Chocolate: It Does Exist!**

Now, before you go reaching for that Hershey bar, keep in mind that not all chocolate is "healthy chocolate."

Raw, unprocessed cocoa beans that have not been treated with chemicals or cocoa powder made from those cocoa beans can be considered healthy chocolate. Chocolate candy made from cocoa beans that have been roasted, treated with chemicals or adulterated with various additives such as hydrogenated oils, animal fats and chemical preservatives is (surprise, surprise) not healthy chocolate.

Simply put, chocolate candy is sugar and fat filled junk food, so stay away!

So how do you know whether the chocolate you're eating is healthy chocolate? Just read the label. If you look at the ingredient labels on many chocolate candy products, you will likely see sugar listed as the first ingredient, which means the product contains more sugar than anything else—including cocoa!

### **Know Your Chocolate**

There's a lot of chocolate out there, so here's a breakdown of what to go for and what to pass on:

#### ***Dark Chocolate***

Next to raw and unprocessed organic cocoa, organic dark chocolate is the healthiest form of chocolate.

Dark chocolate contains cocoa liquor, cocoa butter and sugar (the word "liquor" doesn't refer to alcohol, but is instead a term used by cocoa processors to describe the viscous liquid made from roasted cacao beans). A bittersweet dark chocolate bar contains about 70% chocolate liquor while a semisweet dark chocolate bar contains about 60%. Dark chocolate is best for you when it is unsweetened or bittersweet, but if you do consume sweetened dark chocolate though, try opting for dark chocolate sweetened with raw cane sugar or dehydrated cane juice as opposed to refined white sugar (also known as sucrose).

#### ***Dutch Chocolate***

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Dutch chocolate makers discovered that they could treat cocoa powder with alkaline salts to reduce its slightly bitter taste, a process that's come to be known as the "Dutching process."

Dutch chocolate provides fewer health benefits than natural cocoa or dark chocolate because the Dutching process destroys some antioxidants found in cocoa. You can identify Dutch chocolate by looking for the terms "Dutch process," "alkali added" or "European style" on the label.

#### ***Milk Chocolate***

Milk chocolate traditionally contains the same ingredients as dark chocolate plus milk solids and fats. Milk chocolate typically contains about 20% milk fat, which clearly excludes it from the group of healthy chocolates. Additionally, the dairy products found in milk chocolate inhibit the body's absorption of the powerful antioxidants naturally found in raw cocoa and dark chocolate.

Modern milk chocolate is even less healthy: today's milk chocolate bars and candies are usually made from cocoa powder mixed with refined sugar, butter, lard or hydrogenated vegetable oils, milk products and various other ingredients.

#### ***White Chocolate (a.k.a. the little white lie)***

White chocolate is similar to milk chocolate, but without the cocoa base. In other words, without any real cocoa bean content, white chocolate is not really a chocolate at all (and certainly not a healthy chocolate). A recent study showed zero health benefits from consuming white chocolate.

### ***Hot Chocolate***

Hot chocolate, or any kind of chocolate beverage for that matter, that contains added milk solids, whole milk or cream is not as good for you as a beverage made from pure cocoa powder without any added dairy product or cream (remember, studies indicate that dairy products block the absorption of many antioxidants found naturally in raw cocoa powder and dark chocolate). If you like your hot chocolate with milk or cream, substitute rice milk or soy milk if you want to ensure you are getting the most antioxidants into your body.

### ***Less is Always More***

Remember, just because we've labeled certain chocolates as healthy, doesn't mean you should over-indulge. The ancient adage of "moderation in all things" applies to consumption of all chocolate, including the healthy kinds. After all, even good things can produce negative effects if taken to the extreme.

To learn more about the many health benefits of chocolate, including how chocolate can make you happier and how chocolate can be used as an aphrodisiac, feel free to email me at [Sylviae9@aol.com](mailto:Sylviae9@aol.com) or make an appointment for a nutrition counseling session at the front desk. Otherwise, I'd like to leave you with these words from Pablo Neruda's Love Sonnet XVII, which I think sets the tone perfectly for a February full of success and a Valentine's Day full of the love of family and friends:

*I love you without knowing how, or when, or from where.  
I love you straightforwardly, without complexities or pride;  
So I love you because I know no other way  
Than this: where I does not exist nor you,  
So close that your hand on my chest is my hand,  
So close that your eyes close as I fall asleep.*

Until next time, happy healthful eating,

***Sylvia***

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