

# Heart Health Benefits of Dark Chocolate

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Chocolate, and its main ingredient cocoa, have shown to reduce risk factors for heart disease. Research has shown there are heart healthy benefits to consuming dark chocolate in moderation.

The cocoa bean, which chocolate is made from, contains the following heart healthy properties: **flavonoids, antioxidants, and flavanols.**

**Flavonoids**, naturally occurring antioxidants found in cocoa beans, have a beneficial effect on the cardiovascular system. They can help lower blood pressure and lower cholesterol levels. Flavonoids can also be found in teas, red wine, and other fruits and vegetables.

**Antioxidants** help the body to fight off damage to cells. Antioxidants help prevent “oxidation” to the cells. If the body does not have enough antioxidants to offset the amount of oxidation, cells can become damaged. An increase in oxidation may cause low-density lipoprotein (LDL), also known as “bad” cholesterol, to form plaque on the artery walls.



**Flavanols** are the main compound found in cocoa and chocolate. Flavanols are found to effect vascular health – including lowering blood pressure, improving blood flow to the brain and heart, and making blood platelets less sticky and able to clot.

## Dark chocolate differs from milk chocolate

The more chocolate is processed, the more flavanols are lost. Choose a high quality chocolate that contains at least **60% cocoa**. By contrast, milk chocolate has only 15-25% cocoa, while some dark chocolate can contain as much as 80% cocoa.

Remember that heart health *benefits* must be weighed against the *risks*, including calories and fat. If you are looking for chocolate, whether in candy, powder, or beverage form, choose low-sugar or sugar-free chocolate varieties, and stick to the darkest chocolate you still enjoy. **Moderate portions of dark chocolate (1 oz, the amount found in 4 tablespoons of cocoa powder or 2/3 of a Hershey's® bar) a few times per week can be part of a healthy diet!**

Cleveland Clinic. Heart Health Benefits of Chocolate <http://my.clevelandclinic.org/heart/prevention/nutrition/food-choices/benefits-of-chocolate.aspx>. Accessed March 23, 2014.

Mayo Clinic. Can chocolate be good for my health? <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/nutrition-and-healthy-eating/expert-answers/healthy-chocolate/faq-20058044>. Accessed March 23, 2014.

Mostofsky, E & Levitan, E. Moderate chocolate consumption linked to lower risks of heart failure. *American Heart Association Rapid Access Journal Report*. 2010.