

FOOD OF THE GODS

For centuries the cocoa bean, or *Theobroma Cacao*, has been used for medicinal purposes to treat everything from nausea to infertility. The Mayans and the Aztecs incorporated a cocoa beverage into their ceremonial rituals for promoting good health. Recent scientific research supports what these ancient civilizations suspected - the cocoa bean offers a host of potential health benefits, including benefits to the heart and circulation thanks to its rich flavanol content.



Heart conditions are so common in the US that, odds are, you probably know someone with one, either directly or indirectly. According to the CDC, Heart Disease is the leading cause of death among men and women in the US and costs the US economy about \$200 billion each year. Some risk factors for heart disease include high blood pressure, high LDL cholesterol, smoking, and obesity. There are several things you can do to help combat these risk factors for heart disease, like adding exercise to your daily routine, cooking heart-healthy meals, and taking steps to stop smoking. Adding foods rich in flavonoids such as fruits, vegetables, tea, and even dark chocolate or cocoa can be another proactive step you can take to keep your heart healthy.

What are flavonoids?

Flavonoids are compounds naturally found in plant foods that keep the plant protected from the environment as it grows, such as UV light, pollution, or pests. The flavonoids encompass thousands of different compounds, which have biological activity in our bodies when we consume them from plants. Each class of flavonoids offers numerous health benefits such as cardiovascular health, cancer protection, eye, or brain health. One of the functions of flavonoids is to act as an antioxidant, cleaning up harmful free radicals wreaking havoc inside our bodies. This action reduces inflammation inside the blood vessels and promotes healthier circulation. A very powerful class of flavonoids are the flavanols, a bitter compound found in cocoa beans, tea leaves, grapes, and apples.

Studies have found eating foods rich in flavanols may:

- Lower blood pressure
- Inhibit the oxidation of LDL ('bad') cholesterol
- Raise levels of HDL ('good') cholesterol
- Decrease insulin resistance
- Increase blood circulation to the brain and raise cognitive levels
- Improve mood
- Help the microbes in the gut process food more efficiently

Incorporating Flavanols in a Heart Healthy Diet

Natural cocoa can be very rich in the flavanol compounds, if it is processed correctly, without being alkalized. Dark chocolate can also be rich in flavanols, thanks to a high cocoa content – 60% or more is a good amount. Many semisweet and dark chocolates are labeled with their cocoa content. Keep in mind, however, dark chocolate should be consumed as part of a flavanol-rich diet and calories must be considered. Incorporating a few tablespoons of natural cocoa into meals or snacks, such as oatmeal, yogurt, or beverages is a lower calorie way to add flavanols. You can certainly enjoy small amounts of dark chocolate (½ oz – 1 oz) in your overall healthful, flavanol-rich eating plan, along with calorie-free green or black tea and fruits and vegetables.

Top Flavanol levels (mg/100g)	
	Red Wine (Cabernet Sauvignon): 18 mg
	Apples: 36 mg
	Green Tea: 65 mg
	Dark Chocolate: 129 mg
	Cocoa Powder (unsweetened): 261 mg

Source: USDA Database for the Flavonoid Content of Selected Foods Release 3.2

What about the saturated fat and our cholesterol level?

While eating foods high in saturated fat tend to be bad for our heart health, dark chocolate, though high in saturated fat, has been found to be neutral to cholesterol levels. It does not raise LDL 'bad' cholesterol levels the way eating other foods high in saturated fats does. Why? Most of the saturated fat in cocoa butter is stearic acid, which acts similarly to unsaturated fats, once consumed and inside our bodies. Unsaturated fats tend to promote healthy cholesterol levels by lowering LDL cholesterol and raising the healthy HDL cholesterol. As a bonus, dark chocolate has been shown to help inhibit the oxidation of LDL 'bad' cholesterol, keeping blood flowing and promoting circulation. Not only is dark chocolate not bad for your cholesterol levels, eating moderate amounts may help reduce inflammation and plaque buildup in the arteries.

Just a reminder, February is American Heart Month and Valentine's Day – in honor, show your heart some love by introducing it to some natural cocoa and a small piece of dark chocolate – it'll be a match made in heaven!