

FOR THE LOVE OF CHOCOLATE

'I can't live without chocolate!' I hear you say. Well, you don't have to give it up to enjoy a healthy diet. Here are some facts and some simple tips to beat chocolate cravings.

CHOCOLATE AND ENERGY

Chocolate is a high-energy food and has been used in army ration packs. A 55g bar of milk chocolate packs around 1200 kJ (280 Cal) with 17g fat and 28g sugar. If you are not on manoeuvres or burning this off with exercise, limiting chocolate, along with other high-energy foods will help you stay in shape.

CHOCOLATE AND SATURATED FAT

Just under a third of the fat in chocolate contains stearic acid. This particular saturated fat doesn't appear to raise blood cholesterol levels. Another third contains oleic acid, the good monounsaturated fat also found in olive oil. Compared with other foods, like milk fat, cheese and fatty meats, chocolate is much less likely to push up your blood cholesterol.

CHOCOLATE AND ANTIOXIDANTS

Research shows that antioxidants called flavanols in the cocoa part of chocolate reduce LDL (bad cholesterol) oxidation and blood clotting. There's more cocoa and therefore more antioxidants in dark chocolate. There are none in white chocolate. We haven't yet proven that chocolate reduces the risk of heart disease, but it does suggest dark chocolate is the healthiest choice.

CHOCOLATE AND CAFFEINE

Chocolate contains very little caffeine, with only 13 mg in a 55g bar of milk chocolate. Dark chocolate has more (36 mg), and a strong cup of instant coffee, 90 mg. If you are cutting back on caffeine, you may wish to keep chocolate in your diet.

HEADACHES

It's hard to find research that directly links chocolate with headaches. Other causes, including stress, lack of sleep and hormonal changes are much more likely to be the culprits.

TIPS TO BEAT CHOCOLATE CRAVINGS

- Only eat chocolate in small amounts after a meal.
- Choose the best quality chocolate you can.
- Get your chocolate fix, with fewer calories (e.g., try a diet hot chocolate drink or a small tub of low-fat chocolate mousse).
- Don't buy chocolate as often and don't keep it in the house. This at least eliminates the trigger to eat it because it's there.
- When you buy chocolate, choose small serves like individually wrapped bit-sized bars, a Freddo Frog or Milky Way.
- Eat chocolate slowly.



PIMPLES

Similarly, chocolate and pimples are mostly unrelated. If you think you have an allergy or intolerance a dietitian can help you identify which foods are causing problems. It may not be chocolate.

TOOTH DECAY

It appears chocolate is no more likely to put holes in your teeth than other foods containing sugar. Substances in chocolate called tannins may even help prevent tooth decay.

CHOCOLATE AND CRAVINGS

Chocolate has some addictive properties. It contains theobromine and other substances that may act on the brain and cause some people to feel calm. You may also inherit a sweet tooth from your parents.

Chemicals and genetics aside, remember that chocolate just tastes good and that the pleasure of eating it is addictive. Chocoholics can build this pleasure pattern over years. Research shows that if you only eat chocolate after a meal as a small treat, rather than when you really crave it, you can reduce your cravings.

THE BOTTOM LINE

A little chocolate each day (a few pieces rather than a few bars) can be part of a healthful eating and exercise routine.

References: Choice Magazine (www.choice.com.au), Chocolate Information Centre (www.chocolateinfo.com)