

Cuddle up with cacao!



Chocolate – specifically its purest form, cacao – is a superfood that's particularly beneficial during winter, writes naturopath Teresa Mitchell-Paterson.

DERIVED from beans produced by the cacao fruit tree (*Theobroma cacao*), cacao contains more antioxidants and magnesium than any other food. The beans, which taste like very bitter chocolate, are released when the ripe pods are cracked. These beans are harvested and fermented, before being processed with low heat to separate the cacao butter that lines the bean's interior. The beans are milled into a powder, which retains most of its nutrients and



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enzymes because of the low heat used. Cacao nibs are simply beans chopped into edible pieces, meaning that the fibre, fat, and nutrients are retained. Cacao paste is made by slowly melting the nibs into a 'bark' that is a less-processed form of a dark chocolate bar.

In the process of making chocolate, manufacturers will use varying amounts of cacao, depending on whether it's dark or milk chocolate: the former contains more cacao and flavanols, but flavanols can also be destroyed in commercial chocolate production. Cocoa powder is made from roasted cacao beans. This heating causes some nutrient loss, but cocoa is still beneficial. Dutch-processed (dark) cocoa powder is processed with an alkalisng solution that reduces acidity and bitterness and creates a richer flavour, but this process also destroys some of the flavanol content.

Heart hero

A review and meta-analysis of 19 randomised controlled trials of cocoa consumption, published in the Journal of Nutrition, revealed small – but statistically significant – improvements in people who consumed a flavanol-rich cocoa product compared with those who didn't. Significant declines in blood glucose and insulin and an

increase in HDL ('good') cholesterol were seen in people who ate between 200 and 600mg of cocoa flavanols daily. Those eating higher doses also exhibited insulin resistance benefits and a reduction in triglycerides.

Scientists say potential blood-flow benefits associated with eating flavanol-rich cocoa may extend to the brain, something that has important implications for learning and memory. An Italian study tested the effects of cocoa flavanols in 90 people aged 61 to 85 with good memories and thinking skills. One group consumed a brew containing just 48mg cocoa flavanols daily for eight weeks; a second group had 520mg, and a third had 993mg. Those taking the higher amounts made significant improvements on tests measuring attention, executive function, and memory. Another study showed that daily consumption of cocoa flavanols was associated with improved thinking skills in older adults who did have mild cognitive impairment. Both studies found that cocoa flavanols were associated with reduced blood pressure and improved insulin resistance. Three to four teaspoons of raw cacao powder is the optimal dose, taken in warm water or a nut or grain milk. *

Inside scoop

The health benefits of dark chocolate have been extolled for centuries. However, the exact reason why was only discovered in 2014. A Louisiana State University study found that beneficial gut microbes such as *Bifidobacterium* and lactic acid feast on dark chocolate and ferment it into anti-inflammatory compounds: when the body absorbs these compounds, they reduce inflammation of cardiovascular tissue, so lessening stroke risk.

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