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Opinion:

Eating Chocolate For Your Health

by Bob Bennett

Is chocolate becoming the next health food? A number of studies are saying yes!

Most chocolate is high in calories, adds to the national obesity epidemic, and should be avoided except as a rare taste treat. However, the closer chocolate is to the raw cacao bean, the healthier it becomes. The process known as “Dutching”, which heats the raw product and makes it easier for manufactures to mold it into desired shapes, as well as the processed sugars, milk products, hydrogenated oils, and artificial flavors which are added robs the chocolate of its beneficial properties. Basically speaking, the darker the chocolate, the better it is for you. A few of the upscale markets and Latino groceries also sell cacao beans and powder.

One of the areas which chocolate seems to hold a lot of promise is for Type II diabetes. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention expects that 1 in 3 Americans born after the year 2000 will develop diabetes during their life times. It is already the sixth leading cause of death, with \$90 billion annually in direct medical costs and another \$40 billion in indirect costs. Complications of the disease affect the heart, blood vessels, nerves, kidneys and the eyes.

Italian research shows that cacao flavonoids make the body more sensitive to insulin (or decrease insulin resistance) which reduces blood sugar levels. It suggests the flavonols present in

chocolate can protect the cardiovascular system, improve the utilization of insulin in diabetic patients, as well as lower blood pressure and overall blood fat levels.

Regular consumption of chocolate has also been shown to be a weight control tool, preventing obesity and weight gain in animals, by Japanese researchers. Metabolism and storage of fats was shown to be restricted in the cacao-diet group, and that the fat burning mechanism was increased. Chronic inflammation is associated with low leptin levels, which increases appetite. Cortisol levels increase when elevated inflammatory chemicals are present which helps to break down muscles, deposit fat in cells, and fuels the appetite. The flavonoid content of cocoa relieves inflammation, and for centuries cocoa has been used as an antibacterial agent.

The antioxidant level of unprocessed cocoa is higher than cranberries, blueberries, strawberries, spinach, broccoli and tomatoes. The darker the chocolate the higher in flavonoids (which contain the antioxidants) it will be, but the heat used in the 'dutching' process destroys most of the beneficial effects. The natural flavonoids in cacao have also been shown to be easily absorbed by the body, unlike most artificial additives.

Heredity, severe stress, as well as one's expectations can all be factors in an unhealthy emotional state. Neurotransmitter deregulation is also believed by many to be a cause of depression and other mental health problems. The National Institute of Mental Health reports depression onset is occurring earlier in life than in past decades. Major depression is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for those aged 15-44.

Phenylethylamine (PEA) is one of the lesser known neurotransmitters which has been shown to increase attention and activity in animals, as well as relieve depression in 60% of depressed patients. It is found in cacao at high levels, and is believed to be the 'love' ingredient contained in chocolate. Chocolate is also high in vitamin B6, which is important in the production of serotonin, melatonin, and dopamine. The high levels of magnesium in cocoa, which helps to raise progesterone during menstrual cycles, is thought to be one reason women often crave chocolate.

Theobromine, a cousin to caffeine with fewer side effects, is a natural stimulant which is also present in chocolate. It provides additional energy, improves blood flow and even works as a cough suppressant.

Instead of rushing to put people on high priced drugs for every malady, perhaps more of our physicians should suggest we try some of the healthy alternatives to high priced drugs. It would go a long way towards restoring trust in the medical profession, especially after the March 21, 2007 Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) article on disclosure laws in Vermont and Minnesota and the June 3rd, 2007 article in the N.Y. Times which examined Minnesota's records on drug company payments to doctors and found that from 1997 to 2005, at least 103 doctors who had been disciplined or criticized by the state medical board received a total of \$1.7 million from drug makers. The median payment over that period was \$1,250; the largest was \$479,000. The sanctions by the board ranged from reprimands to demands for retraining to suspension of licenses. Of those 103 doctors, 39 had been penalized for inappropriate prescribing practices, 21 for substance abuse, 12 for substandard care and 3 for mismanagement of drug

studies. At least 38 doctors received a combined \$140,000 while they were still under sanction. Nevada does not require doctors to disclose payments received from drug companies.

Studies:

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