

Chocolate contains powerful antioxidants called flavonoids, as well as some magnesium. These nutrients may help lower blood pressure and reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke.

Dark chocolate is the most nutritious form of chocolate. Compared with milk chocolate, it contains more than double the amount of heart-healthy flavonoids. Milk chocolate has another strike against it: The added milk it contains may reduce the body's ability to absorb the beneficial flavonoids. To enjoy the delicious taste of chocolate and receive the benefits of flavonoids, choose a dark-chocolate variety that contains at least 70 percent cacao, or cocoa.

Dark chocolate's potential health benefits certainly don't give you a free pass to overindulge, though. You'll still need to watch your portions. That's because even dark chocolate contains calories, fat, and sugar that will lead to weight gain if you overdo it, so be strategic about incorporating this treat into your diet. The best dark-chocolate varieties contain only one type of fat — cocoa butter — and do not contain added palm oil, coconut oil, or milk fat. Technically, they're all saturated fats, but cocoa butter has a neutral effect on cholesterol levels, so it won't raise your blood cholesterol the way other saturated fats will.

Try sticking with one-ounce, snack-sized portions, and be sure to account for an extra 150 calories in your daily calorie allotment. You may also enjoy a cup of low-fat hot cocoa (typically less than 100 calories per cup) or a cup of soy milk with one tablespoon of chocolate syrup or powder. These beverages are rich in calcium and can help maintain strong bones. Unsweetened cocoa powder can be used as a flavoring in lower-calorie dessert recipes as well. I often include it as an ingredient in my recipes like Chocolate-Hazelnut Biscotti, Chocolate Angel Food Cake, and Warm Dark Chocolate Sauce with Fresh Fruit. Unsweetened cocoa powder is also a gluten-free food, so if you have celiac disease, it's perfectly safe to use.