The Cardiovascular Health Benefits of Chocolate

Chocolate: An Ideal Food for Heart Awareness Month?

Because the month of February is heart health month and also includes Valentine’s Day, we thought that chocolate would be a fun ingredient to focus on to bring these two themes together!

Chocolate is a common indulgence around Valentine’s Day. Unfortunately, chocolate has been given a bad reputation due to its high calorie and fat content. More recently however, chocolate has been found to have many cardiovascular benefits!

Cocoa and Flavonoids

Cocoa contains a high quality antioxidant called flavonoids. The amount of flavonoids in chocolate depends on the cocoa bean and the processing steps involved in manufacturing the chocolate. Cocoa powder and dark chocolate contain even greater amounts of flavonoids than green tea and red wine.

Cardiovascular Benefits of Chocolate

- Flavonoid-rich chocolate has high antioxidant activity that protects the cardiovascular system against oxidative stress and damage caused by free radicals and it reduces inflammation.
- Flavonoids has also been shown to increase HDL cholesterol (the good cholesterol) and decrease LDL cholesterol (the bad cholesterol).
- The flavonoids in chocolate can also cause vasodilation, which means it helps to expand blood vessels and promote blood flow. Research has demonstrated that flavonoid-rich chocolate can reduce blood pressure in individuals with high blood pressure.
- Flavonoids may also inhibit platelet function. This can be beneficial to individuals with atherosclerosis due to the pathophysiological role of platelets in this disease.
- Milk chocolate has 8.38mg of flavonoids per 100g of chocolate.
- Dark chocolate has six times that amount at 53.49mg per 100g of chocolate!

It’s All About Balance

- Although chocolate has cardiovascular benefits, this does not mean that you should consume it in great quantities on a daily basis. But if you are a chocolate lover, small amounts of dark chocolate may be doing more good than just curbing your cravings!
- Moderation, balance and variety are key for a healthy diet and lifestyle.
- Don’t forget that you can obtain heart-healthy antioxidants from other nutritious foods such as fruits and veggies.

Reference:
Chai Chocolate Pots de Crème

Overview
In light of February being ‘Heart Awareness Month’, you may wish to make your Valentine our healthy version of this deliciously rich, French custard.

Directions
- Preheat oven to 325°F.
- Heat cream, cardamom, cloves and ginger in a saucepan over medium-high heat until brought to a full boil. Remove from heat. Let stand for 15 minutes.
- Put chocolate in a glass container. Return cream mixture to the heat until brought to a boil, then pour through a sieve over the chocolate. Let stand for 3 minutes, then gently stir until the mixture is well-blended.
- Heat milk and sugar. Stir and heat just to a boil. Slowly add 2/3 to chocolate, making sure mixture stays smooth and blended.
- Whisk egg, egg yolks and vanilla until well-blended. Add remaining milk slowly. Strain this mixture through a sieve into the chocolate mixture and stir well.
- Divide mixture among heatproof custard cups. Place in a baking pan layered with paper towels. Fill the pan with hot water until it reaches ¾ inches up the sides of the cups. Place in low oven rack and bake until the top appears barely set (around 16-20 minutes).
- Let cool for 1 hour. Cover with plastic and refrigerate until chilled (at least 3 hours). Garnish with whipped cream and crystallized ginger.

Nutritional Information
Per Serving: 204 kcal; 15g fat (8g saturated, 3g monounsaturated); 132 mg cholesterol; 18 g carbohydrate; 4 g protein; 1g fiber; 36mg sodium; 87mg potassium

Ingredients
For 8 Servings.
- 2/3 cup whipping cream
- 2 ½ tsp crushed cardamom pods
- 7 whole cloves
- 4 slices peeled fresh ginger
- 4 ½ oz semisweet chocolate, finely chopped **
- 1 ¼ cups reduced-fat milk
- 3 tbsp sugar
- 1 large egg
- 3 large egg yolks
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- whipped cream for garnish (optional)
- crystallized ginger for garnish (optional)

** Semisweet chocolate can be substituted with bittersweet chocolate - If so, reduce chocolate to 4 oz and increase sugar to ¼ cup.