

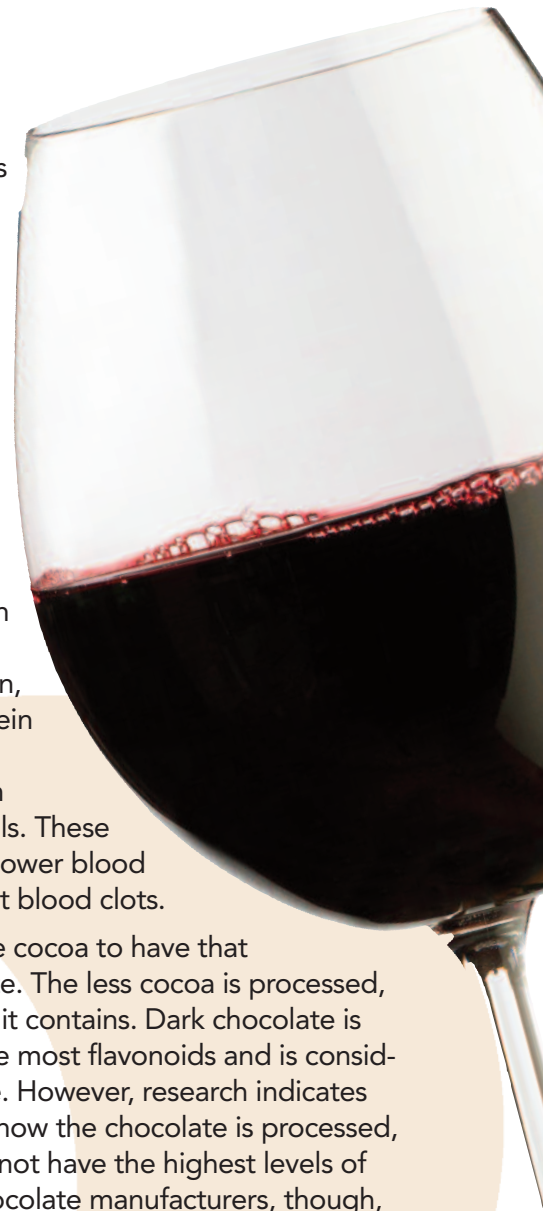
The Urge to Splurge



H E A R T C A R I N G

Who doesn't love to splurge on red wine and chocolate occasionally? Once thought to reduce the risk for heart disease, research now shows

that red wine and chocolate don't necessarily hurt, but unfortunately don't necessarily make your heart any healthier on their own.



The benefits of resveratrol

Red wine and chocolate are believed to have some health benefits because they contain a substance called resveratrol, which is thought to have antioxidant properties that can help protect you from cancer and heart disease.

However, most research done on resveratrol has been done on mice, not humans. The research suggests that the antioxidants in red wine might help protect mice from obesity and diabetes, but drinking excess alcohol is a risk factor for heart disease. To get the same dose of resveratrol used in the mice studies, you would have to drink more than 1,000 liters of red wine daily. That's a lot of wine!

Red wine and your heart health

Antioxidants found in alcohol have been known to help prevent heart disease by increasing levels of high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol, or the "good" cholesterol. These antioxidants could protect against artery damage. Of course, most doctors don't encourage their patients to start drinking alcohol simply for those benefits, since excess alcohol consumption can be harmful. The best way to increase HDL levels is through exercise.

Red wine is often considered to have more heart-healthy benefits than other types of alcohol, but it's possible that it is no better than beer, white wine or liquor. The resveratrol in wine comes from the skin of the grapes. Red wine is fermented with grape skins longer than white wine; therefore, red wine contains more resveratrol. Although red wine has the most resveratrol, a moderate amount of any type of alcohol can increase "good" cholesterol levels in the body and reduce the formation of blood clots over time if consumed somewhat regularly. Those who drink moderate amounts of alcohol seem to have a lower risk of heart disease.

Remember, everything is best in moderation. Women should limit their alcohol consumption to about one drink per day, and men are recommended to have no more than two drinks daily.

Just one little piece of chocolate...

The fat found in chocolate comes from cocoa butter, which has been proven to be heart-healthy and has been associated with decreased low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol and possibly increased high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol. However, its

ability to raise HDL is still debated.

Cocoa beans are rich in a nutrient called flavonoids, which protect the plant from environmental toxins. When consumed, flavonoids boost antioxidants in the body. If the body doesn't have enough antioxidants to combat the oxidation, low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or the "bad" cholesterol, will form plaque on artery walls. These flavonoids can help lower blood pressure and prevent blood clots.

The flavonoids cause cocoa to have that strong, pungent taste. The less cocoa is processed, the more flavonoids it contains. Dark chocolate is known to contain the most flavonoids and is considered the best choice. However, research indicates that, depending on how the chocolate is processed, dark chocolate may not have the highest levels of flavonoids. Most chocolate manufacturers, though, are working to keep the most flavonoids in their chocolate as possible. It's suggested to have a moderate portion (one ounce) of dark chocolate only a few times per week.

What other foods contain heart healthy benefits?

Other foods that contain some resveratrol include peanuts, blueberries and cranberries. Flavonoids, found in chocolate and red wine, are also found in cranberries, apples, peanuts, onions and every kind of tea, particularly black and green teas.

In moderation, neither red wine nor dark chocolate are harmful, but both are not a "cure-all" to prevent heart disease. If you can't resist the urge to splurge, do so by consuming in moderation, and enjoy!

If you have questions or concerns about alcohol consumption and eating healthy, contact your healthcare provider.