

CHOCOLATE: A HISTORY OF HEALTH AND WEALTH. Part 1

Though many people scoff at the benefits of chocolate today it seems to be, historically, a good health food for teeth, body, and mind, and widely cherished and respected.

It has been theorized the source of chocolate originated in the Amazon at least 4000 years ago. The cacao (kah-KOW) tree grows pods of seeds that make chocolate.

Around 250 to 900 C.E. (A.D.) the Mayans drank the dark, bitter drink as a health and spiritual beverage considered 'a food of the gods'. Chocolate played an important role in their religious and social lives, and symbolized *Life* and *Fertility*. They grew it, fermented, roasted, and ground it into a paste to be prepared later for special occasions with hot water. It was consumed mainly by the rulers and the 'more fortunate'.

In the 1400's, mainly the Aztec rulers, priests, and honored people drank chocolate. Priests presented seeds to the gods and used it for sacred ceremonies, even pouring precious sacrificial blood on seed pods while praying to the 'chocolate' god. The seeds were also used as money (and saved like coins and gold for centuries), and as payment for tax and tribute by the conquered Mayans, and other peoples, to the Aztecs. It was a popular Mayan trade-good and was hauled to the rulers in the Aztec capital, now known as Mexico City. Spices, such as chili peppers, black pepper, cornmeal, vanilla beans, and cinnamon were added, as well as nectar and honey.

To make it red like blood, for offerings to the god that brought a cacao tree from paradise to Earth 'on the beam of a morning star' (Quetzalcoatl), they added the color from the seed of the annatto tree. That god was supposedly cast out of paradise for giving the sacred drink to humans.

Some think the word chocolate is derived from the Aztec word *chocolatl* (cho cho LA til). Others think it is a Spanish combination of the Aztec word *cacahuatl* (kah kah WAH till) (meaning bitter water), and the Mayan word *chocol haa* (cho cah HA) for "hot water".

In 1519 Hernando Cortez conquered part of the present Mexican and Central area for Spain and chocolate seeds were sent to Europe in 1528; it was almost as important as gold. He stated it was, "*The divine drink which builds up resistance and fights fatigue. A cup of this precious drink permits a man to walk a whole day without food.*" The Spanish recognized it as nutritional and as a restorative, and treated the seeds as currency in Spain.

It became known as a clerical fasting beverage in 1569. The Catholic Church (Pope Pius V) allowed their followers to drink liquid chocolate during The Fast, when solid food was forbidden. It was re-examined by the church in 1662, and the *drink* was still considered OK. Later, as chocolate evolved, the drink was still allowed but not the eatable form, **until Easter** (enter the Easter Bunny with chocolate candy?).

Between 1760-1790 over 12 million pounds of chocolate were consumed in Madrid, Spain, alone. Within 100 years it became a worldwide confection consumed mainly by royalty, since it was an expensive import. In France, chocolate could initially only be consumed by members of the Royal Court. "So noble a confection, more than nectar and ambrosia, the true food of the gods." (wrote Dr. Bachot, 1662). In 1615, chocolate beans were included in the dowery of Ann of Austria for her wedding to King Louis the XIII.

Chocolate was a status symbol for the upper classes for over 300 years. Chocolate production was similar to many foreign products from underdeveloped places, in that it involved some wage laborers but mainly poorly treated slaves, and the work was labor-intensive in hot, humid conditions. Regrettably, all that work went to feed the royalty their chocolate drinks in porcelain, gold, and silver pots and cups, to flaunt their wealth and power.

By the 1800's mass production made chocolate affordable to all. *Fry and Sons* developed the first official chocolate bar in England, in 1830. In 1875, Switzerland developed milk chocolate. In 1910, Swiss-chocolate became a national dish. In 1913 the Swiss developed the first filled-chocolates. In 1925,

chocolate was first traded at the World Trade Center in New York. In 1938, it was distributed to the Allied Armed Forces in C-rations for strength and energy. It is still provided to the troupes today (three-3 ounce bars in the D-rations), and it is taken into space for the U.S. astronauts.

The Industrial Revolution made cacao, or cocoa, easier and cheaper to process but the farming remains the same; still harvested, fermented, dried, cleaned and roasted mostly by hand. Not just for nutrition and enjoyment, by-products of cacao beans are used in cosmetics and medicines, and the mulch as cattle feed.

Now you can simply go to the store and chose from a wide variety at little cost to you, and enjoy less bitter chocolate than royalty did. Is it as good for us now as then?

Part 2: THE BENEFITS OF CHOCOLATE

There are many stated benefits of chocolate. Some are probably hearsay, some to promote and sell the product and some may just be assumed. The information that follows has been researched but please use your discretion.

Keep in mind that additives and the volume consumed can negate some benefits, i.e. caramel, coconut, fruit fillings, sugar, honey, milk, and a whole bar compared to an ounce. Also, even if something has a chemical your body has, uses, or needs (vitamins, minerals, herbs, medication), once it is digested with stomach acids, food, and other chemicals, gets into the bloodstream and makes its first pass through the liver and kidneys, it may no longer be the same compound, or bio-availability may not be significant.

Historically, long before modern evaluation, chocolate was considered a restorative, energy stimulator, aphrodisiac, anti-depressant, and a food of the gods. Montezuma was said to drink up to 50 goblets a day (supposedly to help create many little Montezumian's), and we don't know how much he weighed or about his health. Montezuma # I lived to be 101 years old, # II lived to be 54, and I wonder which one was the chocolate lover (my guess is # II).

The present claims are:

Dark chocolate - is best, as it has less sugar and milk-fat than milk chocolate; the more bitter, the more tannins and phenolics, the better.

Reduces heart disease - Plants, such as, cacao (cocoa), coffee, and tea contain high levels of phenolics which give the bitter, astringent taste, also found in some red wines. Phenolics help reduce bad fats (LDL's) from oxidizing and clogging the arteries. Dark chocolate is said to help reduce heart disease. Procyanidins present also have been shown to reduce heart disease.

Energizer - Caffeine helps raise the metabolism which can burn fat, but, one oz. has about 6 mgs and one cup of coffee about 150 mgs (FYI espresso has less caffeine than a cup of coffee)

Reduces re-occurrence of strokes - Due to flavonoids and phenolens it reduces platelet activity (clotting). Dark chocolate is less processed so has more flavonoids available. It also contains procyanidin, found in fruits and vegetables, which helps reduce both heart disease and stroke.

Cancer fighter - Chocolate has about 4 times the anti-oxidants of green tea, and tea has been shown to reduce incidence of some types of cancer. Anti-oxidants help get rid of *free-radicals*, which seem to promote cancer.

Anti-depressant - Chocolate releases natural endorphins in the brain, which are morphine-like substances that promote relaxation and reduce pain. Just the act of shopping for it, thinking about it, and anticipating eating it can make one feel good.

Mood Elevator/Enhancer - It contains phenylethamine, a chemical related to amphetamines which stimulate endorphins. There are over 300 chemicals in chocolate, and many are known mood elevators (caffeine and throbromine also among them). An interesting fact is chocolate has a neuro-transmitter, anandamide, that is produced in the brain, which triggers another compound to react similarly to THC in marijuana, but not to the level of "feeling high". THC is not found in chocolate, but anandamide gives a desirable feeling of well-being. It is thought that this is why we have "chocolate cravings". There is no reason for this to cause alarm or concern, as the chemical is broken-down quickly.

Reduces Decay - I think, more accurately, it does not seem to promote decay as much as many other types of candy. It seems to be much better than sticky candy, such as caramels, toffee, taffy, the type one sucks on that allows sugars to be released over a long period of time hard candies, types that contain acids (tart tasting), gum with sugar, sodas with phosphoric acid and sugar, and the like. Chocolate has been found to coat the teeth and protect them from the effects of sugar. It also contains tannins which inhibit growth of plaque and bacteria. The fillings and additives in chocolate candy can counteract the benefits.

Most of the bad news about chocolate is false, such as causing acne. Much research shows that acne is not primarily linked to diet. Too much of anything can cause a problem, and not all chocolate formulas are the same. A beneficial portion of dark chocolate is only about one ounce a day, and a dark chocolate *Mars bar* does not count as a small portion of dark chocolate.

There are some links of chocolate to some problems. Cacao is a legume, so if one is allergic to beans they could have an allergic reaction or asthma attack to chocolate and coffee. Also, chocolate, coffee, caffeine, and wine have been shown to be migraine headache triggers in those that are susceptible.

Remember, all things in moderation, including moderation. Enjoy your chocolate, almost guilt-free.