

Don't Depend on Chocolate Yet

Those hopeful hints, about chocolate really being good for us, keep popping up in the news. With the holidays fast approaching, some people might be stock up on Halloween leftovers and rationalize it by saying "It'll help lower my blood pressure!" Will it, really?

The evidence does seem to be building that some compounds in chocolate do help relax our blood vessels and lower blood pressure. Chocolate beans do have several antioxidants that seem to be beneficial. Some are the same as or similar to the ones found in red wine and green tea. These flavanols help prevent blood clotting. Some of them might protect cholesterol from oxidation.

However, the chocolate that is used in medical studies is not what you buy in your local grocery or drug store. Raw cocoa beans, with all their good ingredients, don't taste like chocolate. They are very bitter. The heating and stirring that changes raw beans into something we can eat and enjoy unfortunately also destroys many of those good, protective ingredients.

Chocolate used in research has been specially processed to preserve the protective ingredients. Or in some cases the flavanols are extracted from cacao beans and used individually in the studies. Dark chocolate and bittersweet chocolate have more active ingredients than milk chocolate. But even they are not nearly as powerful as the versions used in research.

When sugar and milk are added to make milk chocolate, they dilute both the

chocolate and its protective compounds. If you add nuts, granola, caramel, nougat or any other ingredients the protection is diluted even more. And all of it has more sugar and fat than most of us need.

There is only one line of bars, from the Mars company, that uses chocolate processed in a way that preserves most of the benefits. Right now these are only sold in a few locations in the US. They are expensive, much more than leftover Halloween goodies. While the day may come when we can count chocolate as a medicine, it is not here yet. If you want a piece of chocolate, count it as comfort food and take an extra-long walk to burn off the calories.