

Chocolate. A Sweeter Alternative to Statins?

By Alicia Armeli

Ah, it's Valentine's Day once again—a time to reflect upon matters of the heart. But maybe not in the way you'd expect. Heart disease has been pinpointed as the leading cause of death¹ in the United States with recent reports revealing almost one-third² of Americans 40 years and older taking statins—a cholesterol-lowering drug—to prevent heart attacks and stroke.

Statins may reduce your risk of cardiovascular events—but with several side effects³ like liver damage, memory loss, increased blood sugar levels, and muscle pain, many wonder if there's an effective alternative. Some studies say cocoa products, like dark chocolate, show promise in doing just that.

A major risk factor for heart disease—and one that is also preventable—is high cholesterol.² It makes sense that statins work by slowing cholesterol-production in the liver, thereby decreasing the risk of cholesterol-containing plaques from forming and clogging arteries.

In comparison, minimally processed cocoa products may also benefit cholesterol levels (and more!) due to containing flavonoids—a type of antioxidant compound.

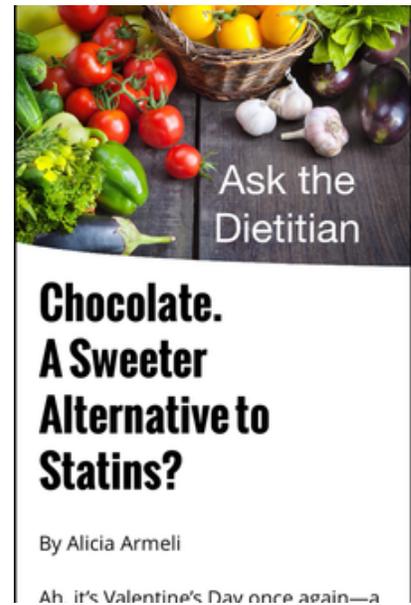
A literature review published in *The Journal of Nutrition*⁴ associated short-term consumption of flavonoid-rich cocoa with an increase in HDL (also known as “good cholesterol”) and a decrease in LDL (often referred to as “bad cholesterol”).

Reductions in high blood pressure and insulin resistance—both additional risk factors for heart disease—were also linked with cocoa intake. Overall, ingesting cocoa has been connected to a lower risk of cardiovascular events—like heart attack and stroke—and all-cause mortality.⁵

Although consuming cocoa products has been linked to these benefits, the evidence is controversial and limited to that of small studies. In order to claim that a functional food can replace a drug, larger long-term clinical trials showing its precise effectiveness would have to be conducted along with the formulation of standardized dosages—neither of which we have at this time.

Currently, cocoa products can best be enjoyed as part of a heart-healthy diet. To get the most out of your chocolate, look for products that have a high percentage of cacao and that are low in sugar. Another option is to go straight for unsweetened cocoa that can offer taste and health benefits to hot beverages, baked goods, and smoothies. It's important to note that the least processed the products are the better, as processing alkalinizes the cocoa and reduces its inherent benefits.⁴

Always talk to your doctor for guidance before discontinuing statin use or replacing medical therapy with diet.



From this Valentine’s Day forward, choose to incorporate flavonoid-rich foods—like chocolate and cocoa—into your daily routine. It could be the first step to following your heart.

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