



It's the romantic season of chocolate—you see it everywhere! (However, it seems chocolate has now been associated with every holiday!) Did you know the average American eats 11 pounds of chocolate each year?? I admit to consuming my share and yes, it's the **dark** that is my favorite. I used to try to avoid my chocolate cravings and often I ended up eating 5 other foods and then returning to the chocolate anyway. Now when I experience those strong cravings, I allow myself to have a small amount of dark chocolate. But I don't just eat it—I **savor** it! First, I smell the wonderful aroma and then I notice how the chocolate feels as it coats my mouth. I enjoy the richness of the taste and I smile as I eat it. And then I can feel satisfied with just a small little piece. This is “mindful eating” (<http://www.tcme.org/principles.htm>) at its best!

It's a bonus knowing that dark chocolate has some health benefits but it unfortunately, it is not a “health food” and remains something to enjoy in **moderation**.

Why is Dark Chocolate Healthy?

Chocolate is made from plants (cacao bean), which means it contains some of the same health benefits of dark vegetables. These benefits are from naturally occurring compounds known as flavonoids, which act as antioxidants. These same compounds are found in green tea and red wine). Antioxidants protect the body from aging caused by free radicals, which can cause damage that leads to aging and disease including heart disease. Dark chocolate contains at least 65% cacao content and a large number of antioxidants (nearly 8 times the number found in strawberries). Two health benefits of dark chocolate are lowering of blood pressure and lowering of LDL (bad) cholesterol. Dark chocolate may also improve insulin sensitivity and reduce the risk of some types of cancer such as breast and prostate. Chocolate in general stimulates endorphin production which gives us feelings of pleasure. It also contains serotonin which lifts our mood and a bit of caffeine and theobromine which act as stimulants. This may help explain why we crave it! Chocolate does contain fats some of which are known to be healthy (oleic acid), some with a neutral effect on cholesterol (stearic acid) and one which raises cholesterol and heart disease risk (palmitic acid).

Chocolate Eating Tips

Keep in mind that chocolate is still a high-calorie, high-fat food. It contains about 150 calories per ounce and does not provide many nutrients. My Pyramid (www.mypyramid.gov) tells us we only have a finite number of discretionary or “extra” calories each day (150-300 depending on your activity and calorie needs). If you eat chocolate, you must balance those calories by eating less of something else. Cut out other sweets, snacks or “extra” calories (but not healthy foods!) and replace them with a small amount of chocolate to keep your total calories the same. Be sure to take the time to taste and enjoy your chocolate! Savor the aroma and every bite! Keep in mind that dark chocolate has far more antioxidants/beneficial compounds than milk chocolate (and white “chocolate” which has no cacao bean in it). Nuts and fruit can add some health benefits (but also calories) to chocolate but caramel and other fillings just add sugar and fat. So remember, **there needs to be some accountability in chocolate eating!!**

Beyond a bit of dark chocolate, other ways to celebrate Valentine's Day might be through a candlelight heart healthy meal (eaten mindfully, of course!), the gift of music (recorded or in concert), a heartfelt written poem or card, a new kitchen utensil, a day outing together, a manicure or pedicure, a ticket to a movie or sporting event, or the old standbys of flowers or jewelry (these are always appreciated!)

Valentine's Day Dinner Recipes ideas: (If you opt to eat out, check the portions and see if it's best to eat it for 2 meals)

Since the 14th falls on a week night, you may want to celebrate over the weekend when you have more time to be creative in the kitchen!

<http://allrecipes.com/Recipes/Holidays-and-Events/Valentines-Day/Main-Dishes/Main.aspx>

<http://allrecipes.com/Recipes/Holidays-and-Events/Valentines-Day/Main-Dishes/Salmon/Main.aspx>

<http://allrecipes.com/HowTo/Five-Valentines-Day-Dinners-for-Two/Detail.aspx>

<http://www.cooking.com/recipes/remenute.asp?Home=reciMont2&Id=883>

http://www.cooking.com/advice/adepicks1.asp?alias=ED_RomanticMenus789

http://www.eatingwell.com/recipes/collections/healthy_valentines_day_recipes.html?utm_source=EWTWNL

Whatever you choose, savor and enjoy the eating experience!

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