

Researchers link cocoa flavanols to improved brain blood flow

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Cocoa flavanols, the unique compounds found naturally in cocoa, may increase blood flow to the brain, according to new research published in the *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment* journal. The researchers suggest that long-term improvements in brain blood flow could impact cognitive behavior, offering future potential for debilitating brain conditions including dementia and stroke.

In a scientific study of healthy, older adults ages 59 to 83, Harvard medical scientists found that study participants who regularly drank a cocoa flavanol-rich beverage made using the Mars, Incorporated Cocompro® process had an eight percent increase in brain blood flow after one week, and 10 percent increase after two weeks.

In this first-of-its-kind study, the researchers found both short and long-term benefits of cocoa flavanols for brain blood flow, offering future potential for the one in seven older Americans currently living with dementia. When the flow of blood to the brain slows over time, the result may be structural damage and dementia. Scientists speculate that maintaining an increased blood flow to the brain could slow this cognitive decline.

"The totality of the research on cocoa flavanols is impressive. This is just one more study adding to an increasing body of literature connecting regular cocoa flavanol consumption to blood flow and vascular health improvements throughout the body," said Harold Schmitz, Ph.D., chief science officer at Mars, Incorporated, which has supported research on

cocoa flavanols for more than 15 years. "Though more research is needed, these findings raise the possibility that flavanol-rich cocoa products could be developed to help slow brain decline in older age."

Contrary to statements often made in the popular media, the collective research demonstrates that the vascular effects of cocoa flavanols are independent of general "antioxidant" effects that cocoa flavanols exhibit in a test tube, outside of the body. While research aimed at studying the potential role of cocoa flavanols in the context of blood vessel and circulatory function continues, a number of previously published studies already suggest that the consumption of cocoa flavanols can have important beneficial effects on the function of the body's network of blood vessels. The body of research not only suggests that cocoa flavanols may provide a dietary approach to maintaining cardiovascular function and health, but also points at new possibilities for cocoa flavanol-based interventions for vascular complications associated with cognitive performance, skin health and age-related blood vessel dysfunction.

Citation: Sorond FA, Lipsitz LA, Hollenberg NK, Fisher NDL. Cerebral blood flow response to flavanol-rich cocoa in healthy elderly humans. *Neuropsychiatric Disease and Treatment*. 2008;4:433-440.

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