

Valentine's Day favorites can offer serious health benefits

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Will the spoils of celebrating Valentine's Day sabotage your New Year's health and fitness resolutions?

No, says a registered [dietitian](#) at Loyola University Health System.

"Many common favorite Valentine's Day indulgences have amazing [health benefits](#) that are supported by research," says Kim Sasso, RD, who regularly counsels patients on achieving better nutrition and also [weight loss](#), at the Loyola Center for Metabolic Surgery & Bariatric Care. "Dark chocolate, in particular, is rich in a group of antioxidants called flavanols, which may help lower blood pressure, reduce blood clotting and lower LDL cholesterol." LDL cholesterol is the "bad" cholesterol that collects in the walls of blood vessels. The most beneficial dark chocolate has 70 percent or higher cocoa content so read the labels to make sure the cocoa level is high enough, says Sasso.

Other foods rich in flavanols include wine, tea, fruits and vegetables.

"Why not offer your sweetheart a fresh, juicy strawberry swirled in [dark chocolate](#)?" asks Sasso. "It's a gift of love that is also good for heart health." Strawberries are also excellent sources of vitamin C, fiber, folic acid, manganese and potassium.

Berries also contain significant amounts of phytonutrients and flavonoids called anthocyanins. "Anthocyanins reduce the risk of coronary disease and protect against inflammation, cancer and [heart disease](#)," says the nutritionist.

And what about that glass of wine or flute of bubbly? "More [research](#) than ever is being done on the many cardio-protective benefits of alcohol," says Sasso. "Red wine especially has been found to contain procyanidins, which protect against heart disease."

Red wine also reduces the risk of colon cancer by 45 percent according to a study published in the *American Journal of Gastroenterology*.

"As with everything, be mindful of portion-size and aim for moderation," says Sasso, who also specializes in healthy weight loss. "People like to demonize sweets and libations, but some actually do have positive health benefits."

Sasso regularly breaks down the health effects of food as she counsels [health](#)-concerned patients in the Chicago area. The Loyola Center for Metabolic Surgery & Bariatric Care is designated as a Level 1 facility under the Bariatric Surgery Center Network (BSCN) Accreditation Program of the American College of Surgeons (ACS). To achieve this accreditation, Loyola had to meet a number of rigorous institutional performance measures.

Since the center's opening in 2012, a multidisciplinary team of bariatric-certified professionals including surgeons, psychologists, dietitians, exercise physiologists and physicians has cared for hundreds of men, women and children.

Surgical procedures offered by Loyola include laparoscopic adjustable gastric banding, Roux-en-Y gastric bypass and laparoscopic sleeve gastrectomy.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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