

## Q&A: Food scientist explains the health benefits of chocolate

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Credit: Marco Verch/Creative Commons

As Valentine's Day approaches, the mind naturally turns to love—and

chocolate. To learn more about chocolate and its effects on us, we spoke with Joshua Lambert, professor of food science at Penn State. Lambert's research focuses on diet, specifically adopting dietary practices to prevent cancer, obesity and inflammation. He has worked extensively with cocoa, the key ingredient in chocolate.

## **Q: Why do we associate chocolate with love and intimacy?**

Lambert: I'll start by saying that I am not a historian, so I can't tell you much about the history of [chocolate](#) and Valentine's Day, but I will say that the process of eating chocolate hits our brain's reward system the same way love does. It's pleasant to eat chocolate. It tastes good, it has fats and sugars, and therefore signals the reward pathways in our brains. There's a biological, evolutionary reason for that. Your body needs fats and sugars to function—and, in terms of evolution, we also need companionship. So, I think to the extent that chocolate is or should be linked to Valentine's Day, it has to do with our neurology. We are giving the people we care about something that, when they eat it, will make them feel good.

## **Q: That makes sense, but it will do more than just make them feel good, right? Doesn't it have health benefits?**

Lambert: Yes. The [human studies](#) that have been done with chocolate seem promising. As far as their effects on [cardiovascular disease](#) and other inflammatory health issues, I would say at a minimum it doesn't seem like there's any association between eating chocolate and getting diabetes or other [health problems](#)—as long as you're eating chocolate within normal consumption patterns. Chocolate is not the boogeyman of bad health that we all heard about as kids.

**Q: Can you explain what you mean by 'normal consumption patterns?' I'm asking this for a friend, who is myself.**

Lambert: The approach I've taken in terms of answering the question "how much chocolate should I eat?" or "what kind of chocolate should I eat?" is to think about it in terms of your overall health. The best thing you can do is have a diet with lots of fruits and vegetable, gets lots of exercise and don't smoke. Then, when you go to have what I call "indulgence foods," you can put chocolate in place of something else.

If you're eating lots of indulgence foods all the time and you don't eat very many fruits and vegetables, you don't exercise and you smoke, then probably adding some chocolate on top of that is not going to help you with your health issues. But if you have a generally healthy diet and lifestyle and you're craving a treat, I'd recommend reaching for chocolate.

**Q: And why would you recommend chocolate?**

Lambert: Our team works primarily with cocoa and animal models, and we have found [health benefits](#) that show decreases in obesity, inflammation and other risk factors for potential cardiac issues.

Other studies using chocolate in humans have found positive effects, where the populations that are consuming more chocolate have a lower incidence of cardiovascular disease and [high blood pressure](#). Now, whether or not that chocolate has to be super dark, containing very high levels of cocoa powder, is unclear, at least from the population studies, because they weren't designed to parse that out.

Note: Cocoa is the seed of the cacao tree, whereas chocolate is processed

cocoa mixed with other ingredients like milk and sugar.

**Q: That leads me to my next question. What type of chocolate should we be eating?**

Lambert: As far as what kind of chocolate you should eat, I would say at this point, if you like dark chocolate, you should eat dark chocolate. If you don't like 99% [dark chocolate](#), then I don't think there's enough evidence to say that's what you should eat. If you like a Hershey's milk chocolate bar, then eat that. It's really about adopting chocolate as that indulgence food to replace something else that maybe doesn't have those added health benefits, and not overdoing it.

**Q: That is music to my ears, Josh.**

Lambert: It's like everything when it comes to diet and health, you have to meet people where they're at. If you don't like Brussel sprouts, then what I tell you about how good they are for you isn't going to matter. So, we should be focusing on what you do like that is also healthy, like carrots. Maybe someday we'll be able to say "you must eat 95% single origin chocolate from this part of the world" but right now, there's no evidence. There's no data to support that sort of prescription. At this point, any chocolate, in moderation, is a good choice if you're craving something sweet.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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