

Chocolate bar shown to lower cholesterol

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The results of a University of Illinois study have demonstrated an effective way to lower cholesterol levels – by eating chocolate bars.

“Eating two CocoaVia dark chocolate bars a day not only lowered cholesterol, it had the unexpected effect of also lowering systolic blood pressure,” said John Erdman, a U. of I. professor of food science and human nutrition.

The study, funded in part by Mars Inc., the company that makes the bars, was published in this month’s *Journal of Nutrition*.

Erdman attributes the drop in cholesterol numbers (total cholesterol by 2 percent and LDL or “bad” cholesterol by 5.3 percent) to the plant sterols that have been added to the bar and the drop in blood pressure to the flavanols found in dark chocolate.

Erdman says that some people will assume the study is flawed because of Mars’ funding role.

“I know that it was a double-blinded trial that wasn’t skewed toward a particular result,” said Erdman, who chairs the Mars Scientific Advisory Council. “Moreover, the paper was peer-reviewed and published in the *Journal of Nutrition*, which ranks in the top 10 percent of all the biological science journals.” Mars has spent millions of dollars studying the biological impact of the flavanols found in cocoa beans and learning how to retain their benefits during the refining process, Erdman said.

Forty-nine persons with slightly elevated cholesterol and normal blood pressure were recruited for the study. Those chosen for the double-blind, placebo-controlled, cross-over study began the American Heart Association’s “Eating Plan for Healthy Americans” (formerly the Step 1 diet) two weeks before the study started; then they were divided into two matched groups. Two types of CocoaVia bars were then introduced, one with plant sterols and one without.

While remaining on the AHA diet, participants ate one CocoaVia formulation twice daily for four weeks, then switched to the other bar for an additional four weeks. Blood cholesterol levels, blood pressure, body weight, and other cardiovascular measures were tracked throughout the eight-week study.

“After the participants started the AHA diet, a lot of them began to lose weight, so we had to keep fussing at them to eat more. We didn’t want a weight change because that also lowers cholesterol,” said Ellen Evans, a U. of I. professor of kinesiology and community health and co-author of the study.

“After starting the CocoaVia bars, we saw a marked differential effect on blood cholesterol, with the sterol-containing products doing better than those without sterols,” she said.

A CocoaVia bar contains 100 calories.

Source: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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