

Cocoa 'vitamin' health benefits could outshine penicillin

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The health benefits of epicatechin, a compound found in cocoa, are so striking that it may rival penicillin and anaesthesia in terms of importance to public health, reports Marina Murphy in *Chemistry & Industry*, the magazine of the SCI. Norman Hollenberg, professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School, told C&I that epicatechin is so important that it should be considered a vitamin.

Hollenberg has spent years studying the benefits of cocoa drinking on the Kuna people in Panama. He found that the risk of 4 of the 5 most common killer diseases: stroke, heart failure, cancer and diabetes, is reduced to less than 10% in the Kuna. They can drink up to 40 cups of cocoa a week. Natural cocoa has high levels of epicatechin.

'If these observations predict the future, then we can say without blushing that they are among the most important observations in the history of medicine,' Hollenberg says. 'We all agree that penicillin and anaesthesia are enormously important. But epicatechin could potentially get rid of 4 of the 5 most common diseases in the western world, how important does that make epicatechin?... I would say very important'

Nutrition expert Daniel Fabricant says that Hollenberg's results, although observational, are so impressive that they may even warrant a rethink of how vitamins are defined. Epicatechin does not currently meet the criteria. Vitamins are defined as essential to the normal functioning, metabolism, regulation and growth of cells and deficiency is usually linked to disease. At the moment, the science does not support

epicatechin having an essential role. But, Fabricant, who is vice president scientific affairs at the Natural Products Association, says: 'the link between high epicatechin consumption and a decreased risk of killer disease is so striking, it should be investigated further. It may be that these diseases are the result of epicatechin deficiency,' he says.

Currently, there are only 13 essential vitamins. An increase in the number of vitamins would provide significant opportunity for nutritional companies to expand their range of products. Flavanols like epicatechin are removed for commercial cocoas because they tend to have a bitter taste. So there is huge scope for nutritional companies to develop epicatechin supplements or capsules

Epicatechin is also found in teas, wine, chocolate and some fruit and vegetables.

Source: Society of Chemical Industry

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