

ASK THE NUTE GURU

THE NUTE (NUTRITION) GURU IMPARTS WISDOM ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF NATURAL, WHOLE-FOODS NUTRITION FOR MIND/BODY WELLNESS.

Q

Hey Nute Guru, I love eating chocolate. Although I know it's not the healthiest snack, are some chocolate products healthier choices than others?

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Not all chocolate is created equal, but it's safe to say the Snicker's bar isn't the "healthiest" option – if that's what you're going for. But how do we know how to get the most nutritional bang for our bite? It's all about the type of chocolate.

These days, manufacturers are actually making it easier to make that call by noting the cacao percentages of products right on the packaging. But what's really the difference between a bar with 80% cacao and another with 60%? And why is a higher percentage of cacao touted as healthier? Let's take a closer look.

The Basics

Simply put, the percentage of cacao listed on a chocolate bar tells you how much of that bar consists of actual cacao bean product. That cacao bean product is made up primarily of chocolate liquor, which refers to a combination of cocoa solids (ground cocoa powder) and cocoa butter (the naturally occurring fat in the cacao bean). Extra cocoa butter (and sometimes, extra cocoa solids) is often added to make the chocolate creamier or more intense in flavor.

If you've got an 80% cacao bar, 80% of that bar will be made up of that chocolate liquor + added cocoa butter and/or solids combination, with the remaining 20% made up of fillers – mostly added sugar.

Although manufacturers aren't required to break down the exact proportions of cocoa butter and cocoa solids in a given bar, you can generally assume that the higher cacao percentage listed, the more of the total combo it contains, and the darker it is.

Does a higher cacao percentage mean a more bitter chocolate?

It's a pretty reliable rule of thumb that the higher the cacao percentage, the more bitter the chocolate will be. Still, like with anything, there are exceptions. Just like coffee beans, cacao beans come in a huge range of flavors depending on the type of soil and environment they're grown in (warm, humid climates are best!) and how they're harvested, fermented, roasted, and tempered.

In addition to the type of bean they use, manufacturers can also opt for different ratios of cocoa solids and butters to make their products, so one brand's 73% cocoa chocolate bar can taste much less intense than another's. Generally, though, you can safely bet that chocolate with 80% cacao will be significantly more bitter than chocolate with 40% cacao.

Does a higher cacao percentage mean a healthier chocolate?

While many people might prefer the sweeter taste of milk chocolate, there's a reason why most nutrition experts have crossed over to the darker side. Since the cacao bean is what actually contains the flavonoids that provide heart-protecting, anti-inflammatory, brain-boosting, mood-lifting properties, it's only natural that the higher the cacao content, the healthier.

Plus, a higher cacao percentage usually means that there's less space for additional ingredients like sugar – which we know isn't doing us any nutritional favors – and dairy, which might block the absorption of cacao's antioxidants.

But remember, cacao percentages measure quantity more than quality. Every step of the chocolate-making journey, from fermenting the cacao beans to heating and drying them, can potentially compromise the antioxidant levels in the end product.

As a result, depending on how the bean is grown, how much – or ideally, how little – it's processed, and how much of the cacao percentage is added cocoa butter versus chocolate liquor, a chocolate bar with 65% cacao can have a better flavonoid profile than one with 80% cacao.

What about cacao percentages in milk and white chocolate?

Milk chocolate does contain chocolate liquor, but many commercial varieties have so

many other ingredients going on (think fillers like sugar, milk, cream, and lecithin) that the actual cacao percentage can be as low as 10%. Where dark chocolate can have 175 milligrams of flavanols per 100 grams, the same amount of milk chocolate can have only 75 milligrams. As for white chocolate, most varieties come with zero cocoa powder whatsoever. In fact, purists argue that it doesn't even qualify as chocolate (we have to agree).

Your Chocolate Cheat Sheet

Unless you're processing the beans yourself or calling the manufacturers to grill them about their chocolate liquor-to-cocoa butter ratios, the exact meaning of the cacao percentage on a standard chocolate bar is tricky to pinpoint. But with a few tricks up your sleeve, you can be sure that it's translating to a more nutritious choice than a chemical-laden sugar bomb.

Less is more.

This applies to both the ingredients and the manufacturing process. Check the label on your bar to make sure that cacao/cocoa beans, cocoa mass, or chocolate liquor are listed before anything else. The fewer the ingredients, the less processed the chocolate is likely to be, and the better it is for you. Some red flags to watch out for:

- **Vegetable oil standing in for cocoa butter.** Beware of this poser.
- **Sugar mentioned as the first ingredient.** This chocolate is NOT what it claims to be.
- **Dutch-processed cocoa or cocoa processed with alkali.** Alkalinizing (a.k.a. "dutching") has been shown to slash chocolate's antioxidant counts.

Check your sources.

Look for dark chocolate made with beans from countries near the equator, like Ghana, Ecuador, and the Ivory Coast. They have ideal climates for cacao trees and produce some of the world's best chocolate, so it's a good bet that an 80% dark chocolate bar from Côte d'Ivoire will give you a product that's high in cacao quantity and quality.

Play by the numbers.

If deciphering chocolate liquor proportions, de-mystifying the manufacturing process, and sourcing the beans isn't feasible in the midst of an urgent chocolate craving, here's the basic math from above:

- **Bars with 50% cacao:** 50% chocolate solids + cocoa butter, 50% filler ingredients (sugar, lecithin, vanilla, etc).
- **Bars with 85% cacao:** 85% chocolate solids + cocoa butter, 15% filler ingredients (sugar, lecithin, vanilla, etc).
- **Bars with 100% cacao:** 100% chocolate solids + cocoa butter, 0% added sugars or flavorings (this probably wouldn't taste very good, which is why you don't see them often, but you can add 100% cacao to smoothies and desserts).

Still not sure which bar you should be reaching for? Strip it down to one basic rule: If you're looking to get the cardiovascular and anti-inflammatory benefits of cacao's flavanols and polyphenols, look for chocolate with at least 70% cacao content.

Lastly, watch your portions.

For all its antioxidant-rich advantages, chocolate is still an energy-dense food. In other words, don't use cacao percentages to justify swapping out your greens for Godiva. Stick to a one or two-ounce serving per day, but savor every single bite.