

October 2017 | mindbodygreen.com | Megan Giller | Nutrition

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Your Raw Cacao Isn't As Healthy As You Think: Debunking The Myths Of The Chocolate Industry

Chocolate is the most coveted and vilified ingredient around:

It's our best friend after a rough day, but it also gets the blame for our detox diet. Then there are the hundreds of articles published about chocolate's health benefits every year. But many of them are based on short studies of small groups of people, which aren't exactly reliable. So which version of chocolate should we believe? Is it friend or foe?

First, let's get a couple of definitions and misconceptions out of the way. I get into this way more in my book, *Bean-to-Bar Chocolate: America's Craft Chocolate Revolution*, but Cacao generally refers to the pod and the fresh beans, before they are fermented and dried. From that point on, it's referred to as cocoa. I suspect that the word cocoa has developed a bad reputation because it often connotes alkalized cocoa powder (that is, a very processed food, one that gives Oreos their distinctive black color). So health food companies have started using cacao, even though it's not technically accurate.

You're probably thinking, *So what about raw cacao?* You wouldn't be alone. The raw cacao and raw chocolate movement is alive and well in this country, with so many gorgeous Instagram photos that I'm constantly craving chocolate. The only problem? Most of that stuff isn't raw. It's tricky if not near impossible to keep cocoa beans below 118°F (48°C) during the fermentation and drying process; meanwhile, roasting is out, and grinding and refining must be done very carefully. About raw chocolate, Ryan Cheney of Raaka Chocolate, a bean-to-bar maker that focuses on unroasted chocolate, said it best: "It's B.S."

Translation: The only time you should pair the word *raw* with *cacao* or *chocolate* is if you are eating beans straight out of a pod on a farm. Otherwise we're talking about cocoa.

Cocoa beans themselves contain more antioxidants (in the form of polyphenols and flavanols) than red wine, tea, and many berries. Cocoa has the potential to, among other things, lower blood pressure, increase muscle function, improve metabolic function, improve cognition, and help guard against memory loss, and its anti-inflammatory effects are off the charts. That's exciting stuff!

So how much do you need to eat to get the benefits?

Scientists are still figuring that out. At Harvard Medical School, Dr. JoAnn Manson is conducting the first large-scale study on the ability of cocoa flavanols to reduce the risk of heart attacks, memory loss, strokes, and other illnesses. She's giving cocoa flavanols or a placebo to 18,000 people for four years, probably until about 2020, and monitoring the effects.



People tend to think: The more antioxidants, the better. But that's simply not true. "More is not necessarily better, and in fact more can be worse," Manson explained. Based on prior research, she and her team have discovered that 600 milligrams of cocoa flavanols is the ideal amount to get the benefits and avoid side effects.

But before you get jealous of these folks in the study, keep in mind that they're not gorging on chocolate; they're taking two pills of isolated flavanols per day. It's harder than you'd think to get 600 milligrams of flavanols from actually eating chocolate. Here's why:

- Depending on the type of cacao, there can be a 50 percent variation in polyphenols.
- After they're harvested, cacao beans are fermented, which reduces the polyphenols by up to 50 percent.
- Then they're dried in the sun, which reduces the remaining polyphenols by up to 25 percent.
- To make chocolate, cocoa powder, and pretty much everything else chocolaty, cocoa beans then need to be roasted (which reduces the remaining polyphenols by up to 20 percent) and then ground and refined into smooth chocolate (which reduces the polyphenols by up to 10 percent).

In short, the more the cocoa beans are processed, the less potent their powers. For example, you'd need to eat 4,680 calories (2 pounds!) of milk chocolate to reach those 600 milligrams of flavanols.

That's why if you're eating chocolate for health reasons, you should choose options that are heavy on the cocoa and light on the sugar and other ingredients. Here are the best options.

Cocoa nibs:

These crunchy treats are literally broken-up pieces of cocoa beans, and they're my No. 1 choice. They're delicious on top of yogurt, in smoothies, or straight out of the bag.

High-percent chocolate bars:

Cocoa percentage is not an indicator of quality: For a 70 percent bar, for example, it means that 70 percent of the bar came from cocoa beans and 30 percent came from added ingredients like sugar and vanilla. So if you're trying to maximize cocoa and minimize sugar, high percentage is your friend. It might sound extreme, but 100 percent chocolate bars (read: just cocoa, no sugar!) can be extremely satisfying. My favorites are Fruition's and Pralus'.

Natural cocoa powder:

Literally defatted cocoa beans, cocoa powder is a great option, especially in smoothies. Look for natural cocoa powder, not alkalized or Dutch processed, and don't be fooled by claims of raw cacao (though it's worth noting that natural cocoa powder is often marketed as cacao powder). You'll need to eat 5 tablespoons per day (only 56 calories) for maximum health benefits.

But at the end of the day, one of the best reasons to eat chocolate is because you love it. Sure, it could help your brain and body on a physical level, but it might also raise your spirits and your mood, making you both healthy and happy.

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