

Oooo la la Chocolat!

Written by Dr. Modi Batterjee, IBLCL, DHA
AlBidayah Breastfeeding Resource and Women's' Awareness Center

We all know that chocolate is closely associated with good feelings such as romance. There is a special satisfaction we get if we cheat on a diet when it comes to chocolate. We savor the moments we spend with our chocolate bars and make many excuses for why we need to enjoy these moments. Many "feel good" emotions over come us when we allow ourselves to indulge in the smooth rich flavors of the cacao bean. We often enjoy the devious feelings we get while on vacation freeing ourselves to enjoy as much chocolate as we want. I wonder why?

Chocolate [**chaw**-kuh-lit, **chok**-uh-, **chawk**-lit, **chok**-] is a raw or processed food produced from the seed of the tropical *Theobroma cacao* tree. Cacao has been cultivated for at least three millennia in Mexico, Central and South America, with its earliest documented use around 1100 BC. The majority of the Mesoamerican people made chocolate beverages, including the Aztecs, who made it into a beverage known as *xocolātl* (/ʃ.ko.la ʃt/), a Nahuatl word meaning "bitter water". The seeds of the cacao tree have an intense bitter taste, and must be fermented to develop the flavor (Wikipedia).

It is believed that chocolate is practically the most popular sweet-tasting delicacy in the world and according to history it has been for centuries. It was the Aztec leader Montezuma who introduced the chocolate drink to the Spanish conqueror Cortez, who in turn took it back to Spain. The Spanish made a few creative and tasty innovations to the bitter tasting beverage – they added sugar, cinnamon, and vanilla. Chocolate bars and candy as we know it today didn't appear until the 1800's. Unfortunately there are many myths surrounding chocolate. Some imply that if it tastes so good, it must be bad for your health; other myths claim that chocolate causes acne, and makes kids hyper. Could these possibly be true?

Ok, we must agree that milk chocolate may not be the healthiest snack around. However, it does contain a number of nutrients such as potassium and magnesium, and provides us with several vitamins such as B1, B2, D, and E. Researchers in New York have found that milk chocolate is one of the only sugary snacks that is least likely to cause tooth decay. The average milk chocolate bar contains approximately 250 calories. This may not be the ideal health food but its calorie count is low enough for a healthy eater to enjoy an occasional chocolate treat. Besides, giving in to our

chocolate cravings every once in awhile can help avoid the bingeing that is a healthy eater's worst enemy.

The best part about chocolate is that in its finest form (dark or black chocolate) it can actually be very good for you. Cacao contains lots of antioxidants and antibacterial agents that fight oral bacteria, which causes tooth decay and bad breath. The mere aroma of chocolate is claimed to increase theta brain waves, which result in relaxation. Chocolate also contains phenyl ethylamine known as a mild mood elevator; the carbohydrates in chocolate raise the neurotransmitter serotonin in our brains that give us a sense of well-being. The mono-unsaturated fat known as cocoa butter found in chocolate contains oleic acid, this is claimed to raise our good cholesterol. It is said that drinking a cup of hot chocolate before meals may actually reduce appetite. The health benefits are more pronounced in dark chocolate because it contains more cacao and less sugar than milk chocolate.

The cultivation of cacao involves intensive time and labor that's extended over a period of three to five years. Sadly, the laborers are given very low compensation rates that make it unworthy of their hard work. These low price incentives for the cacao laborers may be working against its availability and affordable global supply therefore making it extremely scarce. Recently, stated in the British news *chocolate will become as rare and as expensive as caviar*.

Now that we have a better understanding of our physical and emotional relationship with chocolate we shouldn't feel so guilty when we hear its calling. It is true, we do feel better when we eat chocolate, it does have a positive effect on our health and well-being. It may become a rare commodity one day so we should value the time we have with it now and appreciate the effort invested in its availability.

So, choose your chocolate wisely, and enjoy!