Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
October 7, 2018

"Chocolate Studies Are Clouded In Confusion"

A late August 2018 headline proclaimed the good news: "Three bars of chocolate a month can reduce chances of heart failure." Also, some research has shown that small amounts of chocolate (especially dark chocolate) may be good for your heart, your brain, and even your eyes. Another recent meta-analysis found that eating chocolate lowered the relative risk of heart failure, stroke, heart attack, and coronary heart disease. The study indicated that 45 g/week (almost exactly the size of a regular Hershey bar) was the most effective amount of chocolate to eat for reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease. But wait, because too much chocolate cancels out any healthy effects. The researchers' main finding was that people who eat a lot of chocolate (like on a daily basis) had a 17% greater risk of heart failure than people who ate no chocolate. Still, another study found that moderate chocolate consumption may reduce the risk of heart failure" by 23%. They categorized "moderate chocolate consumption" as one to three (not simply three) servings a month. The compounds in chocolate that are believed to work wonders are flavanols, and dark chocolate contains up to two to three times more flavanols than milk chocolate. Flavanols are a type of polyphenol, a group of natural compounds found in plants, that have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Consuming flavanols appears to increase vasodilation, which lowers blood pressure and reduces cardiovascular events such as heart attacks and strokes. Yet, a recent meta-analysis of more than 83,000 postmenopausal women who participated in the Women's Health Initiative study found that eating chocolate provided no benefit against heart disease or stroke in those under 65 years old. In fact, the more chocolate they ate, the greater their risk. Keep in mind that cocoa must be chemically processed to make it palatable, which destroys most of its flavonoids. Further, according to the Linus Pauling Institute, flavonoids are poorly absorbed (usually less than 5%) and the small amounts that do get into the circulation are rapidly broken down and excreted. As can be seen from the data, conclusions are all across the board and frequently in direct conflict.

In the America that I love, we know that eating more chocolate doesn't necessarily result in more health benefits. Eating chocolate to excess (even dark chocolate, which still contains a good deal of sugar and fat) will negate the health benefits of flavanols. Chocolate should be used in combination with a healthy diet, exercise, reduced salt intake and losing excess weight. So-called scientific conclusions are always subject to change as new data is collected. Therefore, my fellow chocoholics, let's enjoy these tasty treats but watch out for the added calories from their sugar and fat content.

Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.
Surgeon/Scientist/Patient Advocate
27439 Highway 441, Kentwood, LA 70444
985-229-6955 Home | 985-229-3760 – Fax | 985-514-0578 – Cell
rhowesmd@hughes.net | www.iwillfindthecure.org