

# Cocoa: Weight Loss Wonder?

by Rustin Hartman

Photo: Mark Perlstein

When you think of healthy weight loss, you probably conjure up words like *appetite control*, *self-discipline* and *abstinence*. These principles are definitely important parts of any healthy weight loss regimen. Unfortunately, some food cravings are too powerful for the average person to handle. The craving for sugar and refined carbohydrates is especially tough for some people. The craving for chocolate is well known as especially difficult to resist.

These cravings are often purely psychological in nature. When you experience mood changes and start to feel depressed or apprehensive, your body begins to yearn for carbohydrates. That's because carbohydrates help release phenylethylamine (PEA) and serotonin, important "feel-good" brain chemicals. Eventually, the levels of these chemicals recede and the cravings return, leading us to eat more. This cycle leads to chronic overeating.

## Chocolate: "The Feel-Good" Weight Loss Food

In recent years, chocolate has become a popular area of scientific study. Chocolate extracts have been shown to provide the "feel-good" response the body craves without the calories and fat of common candy chocolate. Pure chocolate is rich in PEA, which is important for several reasons. First, as we just learned, PEA and serotonin play a role in the way we feel. Researchers have linked low levels of PEA and serotonin to depression. Increased levels of PEA have been linked to feeling like you're in love. Chocolate is also known to be rich in special fatty acids that stimulate neural receptors in the brain.

## Chocolate and Healthy Weight Loss: A Perfect Fit

Overweight and obese people have plenty of reasons to lose weight—some are better than others. Some people want to look better. Some want to have more energy. Others just want to be healthier and to live longer. Most people simply want to feel better—better about themselves, about life and about



the people around them. For any individual, the best reason to lose weight is the one that works—the reason that motivates them to make a change for the better.

No matter what your reasons are, successful, healthy weight loss depends on setting realistic goals and having sensible expectations. If you set realistic goals, you'll be more likely to achieve them. You'll be more likely to set new, more ambitious, yet realistic goals, and you'll be more likely to achieve them, too. You'll keep the weight

to the status quo, and if you change that status too quickly or too radically, you may suffer the consequences. Some people who lose weight too rapidly get sick, lose energy and even begin to lose muscle mass rather than fat. Only in cases of serious obesity should one consider a more ambitious weight loss plan. And, of course, you absolutely should consult with your physician before starting any weight loss plan.

A realistic and healthy weight loss program will address all of these factors. You

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off, and be able to make a permanent change for the better. For many people, a modest goal of losing only 5 to 10 percent of their body weight can be exactly the catalyst for lasting improvement.

Gradual weight loss is much more healthful than radical, short-term weight loss. In most cases, 2 pounds per week is a healthy rate of weight loss. If you exceed that rate by too much, you may put undue stress on your body. Sometimes, the human body gets used

should ignore flashy marketing for products and programs that promise quick, easy results. You must understand that lasting change will not be easy. Once you know and accept that, you will have passed the first hurdle. Any advertisement that says you can lose weight "in your sleep" without exercise and without limiting calories should make you suspicious. Time always seems to prove that these claims are traps for those not yet ready to commit.





## The Real Cost of Overweight and Obesity

Overweight and obesity have been associated with increased risk of developing a number of serious lifestyle and chronic diseases. Scientists believe overweight and obesity may contribute to a host of other health problems. Here are only a few of the debilitating effects of being overweight:

- Abdominal hernia
- Cancer (most types are affected by weight)
- Cardiovascular disease
- Coronary artery disease
- Gall bladder disease
- Gout
- High blood pressure
- Liver malfunction
- Osteoarthritis
- Respiratory problems
- Sleep apnea
- Type 2 diabetes
- Varicose veins

### A Little Exercise Goes a Long Way

The first step toward healthy weight loss may not even require dieting. Many who are obese or overweight start slowly with an attainable, realistic goal like adding regular physical activity to their lives. Physical activity does not have to mean jogging 10 miles

daily; it could simply be taking a 15-minute walk every day. Most are surprised by the difference even a small amount of physical activity can make.

Once you become comfortable with a little physical exercise, add a little more. And soon you'll find yourself doing things you never thought you could. Again, it doesn't take much; just a meaningful start can be half the battle.

### Eventually It Comes Down to Nutrition

Now, we must be clear—a little exercise definitely does go a long way. But, eventually, everyone who wants to lose a significant amount of weight in a healthy manner—and keep it off for the rest of their lives—must develop and maintain healthy eating habits. This is difficult for many reasons, but quite often the main reason is that some people just aren't sure what a healthy eating habit is. Guidelines seem to change every time a new scientific study comes out. First butter is bad, and margarine is good. But then scientists

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discover the danger of trans fats, and margarine is bad, and butter is slightly better—but still not good.

Two bits of simple advice can help the average person determine what he or she needs to do. First, simply follow the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, which emphasize lower fat consumption and increased use of vegetables, fruits and whole grains. Second, supplement your diet with the nutrients your body needs, which it may not get from your new diet.

Even the best diet may leave you without all of the vitamins, minerals and phytonutrients. Avoid fad diets. They often ignore the principles of complete nutrition and are especially notorious for leading to nutritional

deficiency. And frankly, fad diets are much, much more difficult to follow successfully on a long-term basis. Imagine eating mainly chicken, steak, eggs and protein every day for the rest of your life. Such a diet leaves the body so severely lacking in many important vitamins and antioxidants that it simply will not function properly.

### Boiling It Down

Here's a basic how-to list for anyone wanting to lose weight the right way—the permanent way. First, talk to your doctor about your plans. Make sure that you are healthy enough to handle what you are going to do; i.e., increase your physical activity and lower your caloric intake. Second, follow through. Actually increase your exercise and reduce your calories. It's as simple as that.

Make sure your diet is well balanced, with plenty of fruits, vegetables, whole grains and healthy fats. Include at least five small servings of fruits, vegetables and whole grains each day. Eat lean cuts of meat and use only low-fat dairy options. This kind of diet may

not sound all that new or exciting, but if you stick with it and add a little daily physical activity, it can work.

Supplement your diet with functional foods that provide the antioxidants and phytonutrients you simply cannot get from anywhere else. Chocolate may be the best functional food you can find for your new weight-loss lifestyle; it's one of the richest sources of beneficial polyphenolic antioxidants we currently know. (More on that later.) Other fruits like açai and blueberries are also especially important sources of nutrition and antioxidant protection.

Make some time each day (even just 15 minutes) for physical activity. It can be some-

thing as mild as walking around the block or taking the stairs at work. If you come to an escalator in the mall, don't just let it carry you to the next floor; walk those stairs. Park at the far end of the parking lot instead of searching for the closest spot. Every little change can make a difference.

### The Benefits of Taking It Slow

Scientific evidence shows that losing (and keeping off) only 5 to 10 percent of your total weight can have striking benefits for your

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health. It can decrease high blood pressure; it can take stress off an overworked heart. Weight loss can reduce your risk of developing diabetes. Obesity is a leading factor in the onset of diabetes, which has increased at a frightening rate in recent years. Weight loss can simply make you feel better. People who have lost only 1 to 2 percent of their body weight report feeling more energetic and optimistic about life. It doesn't take much. And for some people, slow and steady is absolutely the best way to go.

### For the Last Time: We're Not Kidding!

We'll say it one more time: Chocolate may help you lose weight. Oh, the irony of it all! How could chocolate possibly be good for you? How can it help you lose weight? Pure, dark chocolate (as well as cocoa) is simply good for the human body. Chocolate is packed with beneficial antioxidants, including proanthocyanins, flavanols and other well-studied phytonutrients. We now know without a doubt that chocolate is one of the most beneficial antioxidant foods we can eat. And it's not just the fact that cocoa is packed with nutrition that makes it a great part of a healthy weight loss plan.

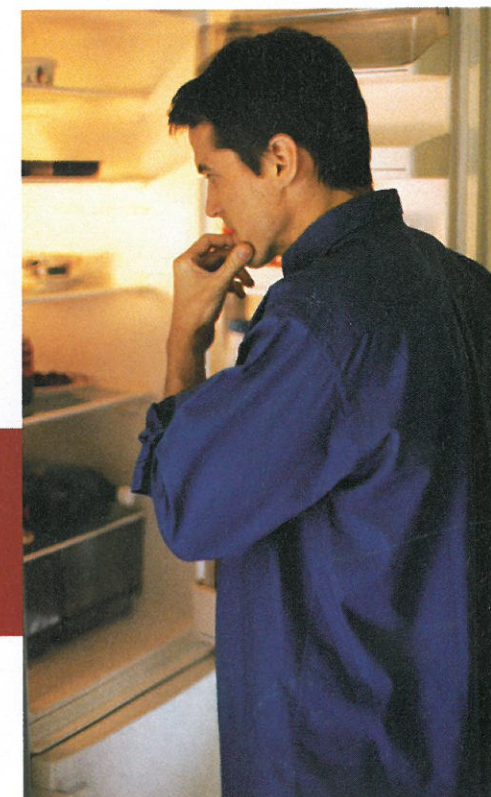
Researchers from Japan recently discovered that regular consumption of cocoa may prevent obesity and weight gain. The scientists, who were from several Japanese universities, found that phytonutrients in cocoa regulated the genes involved in the metabolism of fats. Researchers fed two groups of rats two types of high-fat diets—one diet included high doses of a cocoa supplement; the other did not. After 21 days, they measured the white adipose fat weight and blood fat levels of each rat. The results indicated that all three mea-

sured factors (body weight, white adipose fat, and blood fat levels) were significantly lower for the rats fed the cocoa supplement.

The researchers also measured the change in the expression of genes that control fat metabolism. They found that the consumption of cocoa suppressed the expression of genes for enzymes involved in the synthesis of fatty acids; the rats given cocoa showed restricted metabolism and storage of fats. The scientists also found that phytonutrients in cocoa may have increased the expression of genes involved in the activity of protein-2, which stimulates the burning of fat stores. The lead scientists of the study concluded that cocoa flavanols were responsible for these results and that these antioxidant phytonutrients may prevent the weight gain and obesity related to a high-fat diet.

Chocolate also has chemicals that block the cravings for sweets that often kick off the vicious overeating cycle described earlier. These chemicals satisfy the brain's craving messages with the slow release of nutrients in the body, stopping sugar cravings and stopping the cycle of overeating before it starts.

For many people, cocoa may even act as a natural appetite suppressant. Experts have a number of theories about why this may be.



Some believe that providing sufficient levels of vitamins and minerals decreases the body's need for nutrients, stabilizing blood sugars and preventing blood sugar-related hunger cycles. Others believe that pure chocolate or cocoa helps block the appetite center through anandamide, tricking the mind into believing it has just enjoyed a sugary treat. There is also a theory that cocoa increases the release of endorphins, naturally satisfying cravings for high-sugar, high-fat foods.

Scientists have shown that eating food that you've been craving stimulates a very strong release of endorphins. If these endorphins are already present because of the consumption of cocoa, the body does not have to deal with the cravings, making it much easier to switch to low-fat, nutrient-rich foods.

Put aside the paradox and you'll find that chocolate may be one of the most beneficial functional foods you can add to your healthy weight-loss regimen. The proof is in the pudding—the low-fat, sugar-free chocolate pudding, that is. **BIH**