

Confessions of a Chocoholic

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Some of you will remember that last December I had my gall bladder removed, the result of what the doctor claimed was an over-abundance of dietary residue caused by a substantial increase in appetitory intake. That, in layman's terms, means I was fat because I ate too much!! In the months since that life threatening surgical procedure, ("Are you awake yet, Mr. Webster, because we need the bed!!"), I have sought to limit myself somewhat in a dietary sense, to try to get back to a more normal shape and size. It has not been easy. It has not been particularly successful either, but that's another story.

But now, there has come a revelation, an insight like a message from heaven. Someone in my support group, no doubt concerned for my health and well-being, has given me information that will transform my life. I need to share it so that those who suffer as I do will be encouraged, nay, even liberated by this momentous news.

Chocolate is a vegetable.

That's right, a vegetable. For those, like me, who have been life long lovers of chocolate, this comes as welcome news. How big a devotee am I? Well, I may not have "Cadbury" tattooed on my chest, but I have a substantial amount of shares of the Dairy Milk Division filling out my internal portfolio. A few years ago, my son bought me a coffee mug which reads, "Give me chocolate, and nobody gets hurt," and that pretty well sums it up. I am a self confessed, unapologetic chocoholic.

Now comes this wonderful news, that after all these guilt laden years of surreptitious nibbling, chocolate is actually a vegetable. Mother always said to eat more veggies, so this is a good thing. Some of you are skeptical? There is strong evidence to support this theory that chocolate stands as a proud member of the vegetable family. Let me share it with you ... the evidence, not the chocolate!

Chocolate is derived from cocoa beans. A bean is a vegetable. Sugar is derived from either sugar CANE or sugar BEETS. Both are plants, which place them in the vegetable category. Thus, chocolate is a vegetable. To go one step further, chocolate bars contain milk, which is a dairy product, and who can argue the dietary importance of that.

It is *also* amazing how often you see chocolate paired with things that are unquestionably *fruit*. Fruit is an essential part of any diet, so eat as many chocolate covered raisins as you want. Think how much good there is in a box of chocolates. In my research for this article, which I always take very seriously, I looked at the fruit content of the box ... well not the box, because there is no fruit content in cardboard. But I discovered that the fruit content of the chocolates inside one little container is absolutely mind boggling. Strawberries, oranges, cherries, raspberries, lemons, limes, bananas, among others. (I am sorry I cannot substantiate this research inasmuch as I ate the evidence! But now I feel good about it!) Here in this one package, I have discovered a great source of fruit and vegetables, and all healthy diets encourage us to eat as much fruit and as many vegetables as we like. And don't forget that nuts also have wonderful dietary benefits. How many times do we see the combination of nuts and chocolate, never realizing how good it can be for us? It's one of the miracles of modern science that we can get such astonishing and varied dietary benefits in one nice fruit and nut chocolate bar.

Therefore, chocolate is a health food. In fact, I would like to take it one step further and pose a very serious inquiry. Question: If you eat equal amounts of dark chocolate and white chocolate, does that constitute a balanced diet? Surely the dark and the light counteract each other. And if you add milk chocolate to that, you've got a great three course meal.

So here is my diet tip: Eat a chocolate bar before every meal. It will take the edge off your appetite and you will eat less of the other stuff that may not be nearly as palatable. In fact, in extreme cases, a nice box of chocs can provide your total daily intake of calories all in one place. Think of chocolate as an appetizer, or as a dietary supplement.

But there are even more advantages to this proposition. Chocolate, if you look at the list of ingredients, has many preservatives. Preservatives make you look younger. **Some of you really need to eat more chocolate.** I won't mention any names, you know who you are!

But, I hear some of you protest, there is a major problem with chocolate, especially in the summer. How do you get two pounds of chocolate home from the shop in a hot car without it melting? The solution? Eat it in the parking lot, silly!

Here I have to put in the usual disclaimer. Always consult your physician before following any diet! However, take this article with you in case the myopic medic has not come across the research that I am bringing to your attention here.

To add more than comedic credibility in this article, I went to the internet to research “Chocolate”. Wow! Lots of information and sites, although the research I have propounded here seems original! In reality, chocolate actually **DOES** have health benefits. It is credited for being everything from an anti-depressant to an aphrodisiac.

Obviously, eating too much of any food can cause health problems. However, recent research at the University of California has found that chocolate carries high levels of chemicals known as phenolics, some of which may help lower the risk of heart disease. Phenolic compounds are found in all plant products. Andrew Waterhouse, a wine chemist has for several years been studying the possible health benefits of antioxidant phenolics found in red wine.

So how might phenolics prevent heart disease? Apparently, they prevent fat-like substances in the bloodstream from oxidizing and clogging the arteries. Says Waterhouse: "It's now believed that atherosclerosis, or the formation of plaque in the arteries, is caused by oxidation of LDL (low-density lipoproteins) -- that's one of the cholesterol particles. At first, this leads to subtle damage, and then eventually to the formation of advanced plaque." The buildup of plaque can lead to clogging of the arteries, a major cause of heart attacks.

While phenolics have chemically been proven to reduce oxidation, Waterhouse cautions that: “It's not known if the phenolic compounds, like the flavenoids that are present in chocolate, can reduce disease. It's well known that these substances are antioxidants in a chemical sense ... but we don't have strong, large-scale, controlled human studies. More research still needs to be done, but certainly the initial research is encouraging.”

That’s good enough for me. Pass the chocolate.

And one more thing, if I can again risk contradicting my dear departed mother. Chocolate **DOES** grow on trees!