

3 Not So Evils for Your Heart

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In my cardiology practice I'm frequently asked about three common indulgences—coffee, chocolate and alcohol, and whether they're good or bad for our heart.

Data on all three has been mixed—some good and some bad.

Since medical school, I've tried to practice what I preach, using evidence as the basis for sound advice. That said, I believe chocolate, coffee and alcohol when individualized and used as directed, can be advantageous for your heart health.

And here's the data used to formulate this advice.

Sweet Tooth makes a Sweet Heart

Chocolate is often thought of as a decadent and sinful indulgence, yet science suggests it's not half bad for your ticker. In fact, recent research showed certain compounds in cocoa and dark chocolate may enhance cardiovascular health.

Researchers at Yale University recently showed how just two hours after eating dark chocolate subjects' blood pressure dropped and their blood flow improved.

Similarly, Dutch researchers helped prove the amazing cardiac power of chocolate and cocoa. In the study, the amount of cocoa-containing food consumed by 470 elderly men was tracked over 15 years. Results showed those who consumed the most cocoa-containing products, were half as likely to die from cardiovascular disease as those who consumed the least.

Some of the reasons dark chocolate and cocoa may protect our heart include:

- An artery relaxing effect which can lower blood pressure, and increase blood flow.
- A plaque stabilizing effect that helps prevent blocked arteries
- A mild anti-blood clotting effect
- A surprisingly high amount of antioxidants in chocolate are called flavanols, (also found in red wine and tea).

Cardiac Dine with a Little Wine

There are now more than 20 studies suggesting a cardio-protective effect of light to moderate alcohol consumption among healthy individuals as well as for those with preexisting heart disease. And much has been written about the benefits of red wine. Light to moderate alcohol consumption is defined by one drink daily and more specifically one 12 oz. beer, 4-6 oz of wine, 1.5 oz. of 80-proof spirits, or 1 oz of 100-proof spirits.

Reasons for the observed cardiovascular benefits of alcohol include:

- Raises HDL levels—the good cholesterol
- Contains high flavinoid levels (potent antioxidants) especially in red wine
- Lowers blood pressure.
- Decreases blood clotting.
- Helps prevent arterial damage caused by high LDL, or "bad " cholesterol.

Note: Drinking alcohol can be harmful for some people. If for example, you are pregnant or have a history of alcoholism, you should avoid alcohol.

Cup O' Joe Makes the Ticker Go

Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health analyzed medical records and questionnaires detailing coffee consumption for more than 120,000 subjects and found people who drank as much as five cups of coffee each day had no greater

coronary heart disease risk than subjects who drank less than one cup of coffee per month.

Similarly, researchers from the University of Minnesota and The Iowa Women's Health Study looked at coffee consumption in more than 27,000 women over the age of 55. Results showed those who drank one to three cups per day, had a 24 percent reduction in the risk of death due to cardiovascular disease compared to those who didn't drink coffee.

The proposed cardio-protective mechanism of coffee:

- Coffee may be primary source of anti-inflammatory antioxidants which may slow the progression of coronary artery disease.

Note: You should not drink coffee if it causes palpitations, feelings of agitation or difficulty sleeping.

In Summary:

So, when it comes to chocolate, alcohol and coffee, first ask your doctor about how each might fit with your specific cardiovascular risk profile. And if you're like most, following these simple guidelines will allow you to eat, drink, and be merry.

Dr. John Kennedy is an invasive cardiologist and board member of the American Heart Association. He has a particular interest in the negative impact of stress on our cardiovascular system and speaks regularly to businesses about managing stress in the workplace. Dr. Kennedy is co-author of the book "Breathe: Heal Your Heart in Just 15 Minutes a Day," which will be released in 2009.



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