

Does Hot Chocolate Help You Sleep?

It's not just a health fad or old wife's tale: chocolate has many health benefits, including improved sleep. Once considered a food from the gods and valuable enough to be used as currency, chocolate is now a staple treat around the globe. So, what's the truth - can hot cocoa help you catch some much-needed Z's?

Is chocolate an original 'superfood'?

We wouldn't have chocolate without cacao, the beans from a plant native to Central and South America. It's not quite clear who really started harvesting cacao first, but it's likely that the Olmecs, who lived in the southern region of modern Mexico, were [among the first](#) to roast, grind, and consume the cacao beans in some form. A clay pot from about 1500 B.C.E. (3500 years ago) was found with traces of theobromine, a chemical notably found in cacao as well as other foods and drinks.

The Maya took cacao and turned it into a revered household staple. The use of a frothy, thick chocolate drink - commonly mixed with chili peppers, honey, or water - for dinnertime is recorded in their history. The drinks were also important to close a deal or to celebrate. If you think that was an intense dedication to chocolate, consider the Aztec. They believed cacao was a gift from their gods, and more valuable than gold. The cacao beans themselves were even used as currency!

Consumed both hot and cold, the drink was typically spiced with chili peppers, thick, and more bitter than the chocolate we are familiar with today. It had multiple uses, but the most famous connoisseur was the Aztec ruler, Moctezume II, who reportedly drank a few gallons per day for energy and health. By then, warriors were consuming the drink regularly for strength and stamina.

By the 1600s, cacao made it to Spain and spread through Europe, where new recipes were created using other ingredients - like sugar - and chocolate became more of the decadent treat we know today versus a spicy, bitter drink.

Does consuming chocolate have health benefits?

Chocoholics everywhere perked up when health news headlines began saying that chocolate - specifically dark chocolate - was good for them. But is it true?

To start, the closer you get to the original cacao, the better. In other words, the darker the chocolate, the healthier. (Sorry, all of you white chocolate fans out there - still delicious, but it's not the same!) To qualify as dark chocolate, the treat needs to be at least 50% cocoa and shouldn't contain milk, unlike milk chocolate. The best bars to reach for have between 70% and

85% cocoa; many have other added flavors like sea salt or chili pepper to balance the bitterness.

Dark chocolate contains a significant amount - up to a full recommended daily intake, depending on serving size and composition - of the following:

- Dietary fiber
- Iron
- Magnesium
- Copper
- Manganese
- Potassium
- Phosphorus
- Zinc
- Selenium

In addition to those, dark chocolate also contains a significant amount of both flavanols and polyphenols - antioxidants. Antioxidants are critical in slowing damage from free radicals over time by lessening or preventing oxidative stress on the body.

For reference, free radicals are unstable atoms. Oxygen splits in our bodies into single atoms with unpaired electrons...and electrons really hate being single. So, they desperately search the body for other electrons, damaging other cells, DNA, and proteins. Some diseases linked to damage from free radicals include eye disease, heart disease, and diabetes. Yikes!

Some studies have shown positive effects of dark chocolate consumption including reduced inflammation, improved [blood pressure numbers](#), and more. Needless to say, there are a *lot* of potential benefits.

Are there negative effects to eating chocolate?

It's hard to make blanket statements, but we'd have to say yes: there are some potential risks and negative things to watch for when considering dark chocolate.

First, the recipe, quality of ingredients, and how the chocolate is processed all play into the final result. Some products may be higher in sugars and undesirable fats than others. Given that chocolate is also...still chocolate...it is a higher calorie food. This is not inherently a bad thing, but something you should be aware of.

Second, cocoa contains caffeine. The amount varies - ultimately containing less than a cup of coffee per serving - but since caffeine is a stimulant, it may give some people jitters. Unless you plan on eating a dozen bars of chocolate daily, or have a pre-existing sensitivity to caffeine, it's unlikely you'll notice this particular issue.

Bottom line: all things in moderation. Take the time to [find the right dose](#) for you and it's more than possible to enjoy the benefits of a good chocolate without compromising on your health goals!

So, can chocolate improve sleep quality?

Short answer: yes, it can! Or, at the very least, it can help counteract effects of sleep deprivation. A [2016 study](#) found that a bar of dark chocolate - in this case, 80% cocoa - actually helped fix the negative cardiovascular effects of sleep deprivation.

Cocoa contains something called theobromine. Despite theobromine being a stimulant - in the same class as caffeine - it doesn't actually get you wired. Theobromine doesn't stimulate the central nervous system like caffeine does. Instead, it regulates cardiovascular activities, pushing nutrients into the body more efficiently. There is no existing evidence that theobromine keeps folks awake, instead, there is some evidence showing that theobromine helps people sleep.

The most important compound in dark chocolate, when talking about sleep, is tryptophan. Tryptophan actually stimulates the production of serotonin and melatonin, both of which are said to aid the onset of restful sleep.

Cocoa and cannabis, a dreamy match

Our bodies have something called the endocannabinoid system (ECS); it's wired through pretty much every bit of us, which is why so many people love weed so much.

So, what happens when you [combine chocolate and marijuana](#)? Cocoa has two other chemicals we haven't mentioned yet: N-oleoethanolamine (OEA) and N-linoleoylethanolamine (18:2 LOEA). These are similar to something called Anandamide, which interacts with the ECS similar to how THC and other cannabinoids do. It's said that OEA and LOEA slow the breakdown of anandamide - and could do the same for THC, CBD, CBN - enhancing their effects and making them last longer.

Many people consume cannabis to sleep and it's been found that a combination of THC, CBD, or CBN is most effective - the entourage effect, it's called. Add the sleep benefits of cannabinoids with chocolate, and you have a delicious solution to sleep woes.

Sleeping better with Nite Bites

We've established that chocolate has a *lot* of potential health benefits, including the possibility of improved sleep. It comes down to quality ingredients and individual needs more than anything else.

Your ideal bedtime indulgence should be low in sugar and formulated with the intent to maximize restful sleep. We personally recommend trying a DIY hot cocoa recipe using our [Nite Bites](#) to add coziness to your routine and drift to sleep.