



## Chocolate Therapy

### Research Update

It's always great to have one less thing to feel guilty about. Here's the latest and greatest: dark chocolate works like aspirin to help thin the blood and prevent blood clots that could lead to a heart attack or stroke.

A recent study at Johns Hopkins University that was looking at aspirin's affect on heart disease required that participants forego chocolate, red wine, grapefruit juice and caffeinated beverages (including tea) for 24-48 hours before their blood tests. Approximately 12% of those in the study could not stop eating chocolate for even that short amount of time. Their blood was tested anyway and the researchers found that the chocolate they had eaten seemed to slow their blood clotting time (which is a good thing). This is the same effect that the researchers were expecting to see with aspirin therapy, though aspirin does seem to have a stronger effect on making platelets less "sticky."

There is still much research that needs to be done in this area—especially on how much dark chocolate we should eat and how often we should eat it. Also, there are different risk factors that would probably determine if chocolate therapy is right for you or not. If you are overweight, adding more calories through chocolate would probably increase your heart disease risk rather than lowering it, and if you have a history of heart disease, then it's probably better to take your aspirin. For those who are healthy and are at a healthy weight, though, I recommend that high-quality dark chocolate be your first choice when it's time to indulge. My favorites are *Dove* dark chocolate Promises and *Scharffen Berger* 70% cacao dark chocolate bars.

## Emotional Eating

**Ah,** December—the peak of the holiday season. Ironically, this is the time of the year when many people hit their lowest point emotionally. Holidays can be a very stressful time for many different reasons. Many people feel lonely, others feel over-extended, while some feel sad or even anxious. We all have different coping mechanisms for dealing with these negative emotions and, unfortunately, many people turn to food to comfort themselves. This practice is called emotional eating. Emotional eating is defined as eating in response to emotional cues rather than true physical hunger. These emotional cues are usually negative (feeling sad, lonely, embarrassed, etc.), but they could also be positive emotions (feeling celebratory, convivial, happy, etc.). Do you think you could be an emotional eater? Answer the following three questions to find out:



### Many people turn to food to comfort or reward themselves.

1. Do you reward yourself with food?
2. Do you comfort yourself with food?
3. Do you use food to unwind or calm yourself down?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you may be an emotional eater. The truth is that everyone is an emotional eater from time to time. Even I reward myself with a piece of chocolate occasionally. Is this a behavior to be concerned about? It would be if I ate a whole box of chocolate rather than just one piece. When your rewards surpass moderation and move into the excessive category, then you have probably crossed over into emotional eating.

Emotional eating is a poor coping mechanism for many reasons. One significant reason is that it usually leads to overeating and weight gain.

Most emotional eaters struggle with their weight and find that until they get their emotional eating under control, a healthy weight is impossible to maintain. Another reason is that emotional eating is a vicious cycle; you eat to suppress a negative emotion, but that suppression is only temporary. Once the "food high" wears off, you are left with those same bad feelings plus feelings of guilt and self-judgment, which in turn lead you to eat again. Finally, eating is not a constructive way of dealing with your problems. Food is only a temporary distraction from dealing with the serious issues with which you may be grappling.

You do have the power to change your eating behavior. Taking control of your emotional eating will give you a sense of accomplishment and help boost your self-esteem. If you feel that you are ready to take on your emotional eating and break the cycle this December, then read on for strategies that can help free you from this self-destructive practice.

- **Have a plan.** When you sense that you are gearing up for some mind-numbing munching, have a defense plan in place that will help lure you away from eating. I love the idea of converting a cookie jar into an activity jar filled with scraps of paper that list different short, fun, healthful, and relaxing activities. Write one activity per paper, such as take a bath, walk around the block, do 50 crunches, practice breathing for three minutes, drink a glass of water, play with your pet for five minutes and read a chapter in a book.

*continued...*

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## *Emotional Eating continued...*

When you want to climb into your cookie jar, head for the activity jar instead. A change of scenery is definitely in order, so make sure your activities take place outside of the kitchen.

- **Learn to recognize physical hunger.** Begin to use the hunger scale to rate your hunger and satiety. The scale ranges from 1 to 5 where 1 is very hungry and 5 is very full:

**1 = very hungry**

**2 = somewhat hungry**

**3 = comfortable**

**4 = comfortably full**

**5 = very full**

Every time you're about to eat, rate your hunger. The goal should be to always stay between a 2 and a 4, without going to either extreme. If you eat when you're a 1, then you've waited too long to evaluate your hunger. If you eat when you're a 4 or a 5, then you're practicing mindless munching. The purpose of the hunger scale is to help get you back in touch with your physical hunger rather than your emotional hunger. We are all born with the innate ability to regulate our appetites, but years of overeating, restricting and dieting have removed us from our sense of hunger and satiety. Combine the hunger scale with some mindfulness to help yourself start listening to your body. Eat when you are hungry and stop when you are full. This will take a lot of work because it requires really getting in touch with your body and listening to it each moment, while doing away with your self-judgments and rationalizations. Learn to dislike the physical feeling of over-feeding yourself. Take the time to savor every aspect of your meals: the colors, aromas, textures, and flavors (this will require turning off the television).

- **Keep a food journal.** Keeping a food journal can help you identify emotional eating and other eating patterns, like the times of day when you're most hungry and the times when you're not hungry but you still eat. It has been proven that people who use food journals are more successful at changing their eating behaviors and they have an easier time losing weight and keeping it off. The best way to use your journal is to write down the time you eat, what you eat, how much you eat, your hunger scale rating before and after you eat and how you are feeling emotionally and physically when you begin to eat. Journaling forces you to "own" your behavior and the foods you eat. Once you identify your emotional eating times, plan a different activity, like a brisk walk, for that time of day. Pay attention and learn to recognize the circumstances under which you're not actually hungry but you want to eat. You can also use a journal to help you identify specific activities that are eating triggers, such as watching TV, talking on the phone or eating with a certain person. Once you identify your eating triggers, go back to the "have a plan" section and work on your defense.

**You owe it to yourself to have a healthy relationship with food.**

- **Seek psychological counseling.** Psychotherapy is not for everyone, but it may be necessary to help you break out of the emotional eating cycle. A therapist can offer guidance and support for dealing with all of the scary issues and feelings that are being buried under food. The insights of an impartial person might be just what you need to start exploring (and changing) those chaotic emotions.

- **Get adequate exercise.** One great strategy for getting in touch with your appetite is to get in touch with your body. Exercise can help relieve stress and possibly feelings of anger and aggression. It's also a great boredom fighter and certain activities can reduce loneliness if they are group or team events or if they take place at a gym. Another benefit is that exercise not only burns calories, but regular exercisers tend to eat fewer calories overall. It seems that exercise is a natural appetite suppressant. Meditation and yoga (a moving meditation) are excellent ways to relieve the emotions that lead to emotional eating. Mind-body techniques such as these are helpful for increasing self-awareness, meaning they can help you get in touch with your true feelings of hunger and satiety.

- **Get adequate sleep.** Sleep deprivation makes you hungrier and it weakens your resolve to eat well. We all know from experience that exhaustion will lower your standards for the types of food you will allow to pass through your lips. When you are well-rested, however, you will be much more likely to have the energy to fight your emotional eating urges and employ your defensive strategies.

- **Empower yourself with knowledge about healthy eating.** Try to bring balance to every meal that you eat. Include at least two servings of produce, one serving of whole grains, one serving of protein, and a little bit of healthy fat at each meal. Eating well nourishes your body and your soul, which is important for building a sense of pride and self-respect. Another benefit of eating healthful, balanced meals is that your physical hunger is minimized, which in turn can help you better defend yourself against emotional eating.

- **Honor Yourself.** Honoring yourself and your food should be your ultimate goal. Respect and listen to your body's needs and attempt to only put the highest quality, most thoughtfully prepared foods into it. Feed yourself with love and respect, not fear or judgment, and you will see how easy it can be to achieve the weight and health that you desire.

Emotional eating is extremely common and, as I said, it tends to be exacerbated by the holiday season, though it can be a problem any time of the year. That's why now is as good of a time as any to break out of this behavior. You owe it to yourself to have a healthy relationship with food and to treat your body and emotions with respect. Making changes will take effort and planning and it may even be a little scary, but sometimes the most difficult tasks can also be the most rewarding.

*Our registered dietitian has a Masters in Public Health. However, she is not a doctor and her nutritional recommendations are general in nature and not tailored to specific health problems. Talk to your physician or other qualified health care practitioners concerning particular health issues or before beginning any nutritional program.*

# Can You Taste it?

We all remember the elementary school science lesson about sweet, sour, salty and bitter tastes and, until recently, there were only four identified tastes (so don't start thinking that your science teacher didn't do her homework!). However, a scientist in Japan actually identified and named umami – the “fifth” taste – about 100 years ago, hence the Japanese-sounding name, which translates to mean “delicious essence.” Umami has been kept a secret for quite some time, but in the 1980s, several studies confirmed that umami was indeed the fifth taste. The fifth taste is subtle, but can best be described as savory. The important thing to know, though, is that understanding umami can help make you a better cook, since umami's essential role is to enhance flavor.

Three of the most familiar umami foods are tomatoes, soy sauce and Parmigiano Reggiano cheese. If an umami food is paired with a sweet or salty food, it will magnify and round out the sweetness or saltiness – think about how a sprinkling of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese enhances your spaghetti marinara. If umami is paired with a sour or bitter food, it will mute those unpleasant flavors – think about Asian cooking where bitter greens like cabbage and bok choy are cooked with soy sauce to quiet the bitter taste and enhance the overall flavor of the dish.

Umami really magnifies the taste of savory foods by extending the amount of time the flavors linger on your tongue. Think about how the richness of a steak eaten with sautéed onions lingers in your mouth after you have swallowed. Another great way to understand how umami works is to think about



drinking an earthy, bold red wine (wine contains umami). If you drink it while eating a sweet food, like a fruity dessert, the sweetness in the dessert will bring out the bitterness in the wine and cancel any sweetness that existed. Yuck. On the other hand, if you drink the wine while eating cheese, which contains salty and astringent elements, the taste of both the cheese and the wine will be greatly enhanced by the pairing and the sweetness in the wine will be magnified.



Umami foods are naturally rich in the amino acid glutamate (Monosodium Glutamate, or MSG, was the first artificial umami flavor). The savory flavor of umami is that of the isolated amino acid glutamine, which you can see and taste distinctly in a wedge of parmesan cheese. Those white crystals covering the cheese are actually the glutamate that has formed in the aging process and they contain the umami taste that gives the cheese its unique flavor. The processes of aging, curing and fermenting, in

fact, bring out the umami in foods (prosciutto, cheese and balsamic vinegar are good examples of this). Many people cannot identify the taste of umami on its own, but that is not a problem as long as the person doing the cooking understands and applies the principles of using the different taste combinations to enhance the flavor of what they are cooking. To help you put umami to use, I have compiled a list of umami-containing foods. Use them in combination with one another or use them to help enhance or mute the other four tastes in whatever foods you prepare. Who knows, with the help of umami, you may even learn to love a previously hated bitter vegetable! Bon Appétit—or should I say Umami?



## Umami Foods

### Vegetables

- Asparagus
- Carrots
- Chinese cabbage
- Enoki mushrooms
- Olives
- Onions
- Porcini mushrooms
- Potatoes
- Seaweed
- Shiitake mushrooms
- Soy beans
- Sweet potatoes
- Tomatoes
- Truffles



### Condiments and Seasonings

- Anchovy paste
- Balsamic vinegar
- Bouillon
- Fish sauce
- Ketchup
- Miso
- Oyster sauce
- Soy sauce
- Tomato paste
- Tomato sauce
- Worcestershire sauce



### Protein-Rich Foods

- Bacon
- Beef
- Bonito Flakes
- Chicken
- Clams
- Cod
- Cured ham
- Cured Salami
- Mackerel
- Oysters
- Parmigiano Reggiano cheese
- Other aged cheeses
- Pork
- Sardines
- Scallops



# Food of the Month

# Spinach

Raise your hand if you missed spinach in September and October.

I sure did, and now that spinach is available again, the time is ripe for me to remind you about just how healthful it is. Popeye had good reason to love this

versatile green: it's a nutritional powerhouse. Beta carotene, lutein, vitamin C, and folate are found in large quantities in spinach. Plus, a cup of the raw stuff has just 7 calories!

Beta carotene is converted into vitamin A in the body, where it acts as an antioxidant that may help prevent cataracts and certain cancers. It can also help boost the immune system. Lutein, another carotenoid, acts as an antioxidant to protect against macular degeneration in the eyes, and may prevent plaque from building up in the arteries. Lutein consumption may play a role in maintaining the health of the skin, as well as the breasts and cervix in women. One cup of raw spinach (half a

serving) contains about 4 of the 6 milligrams

of lutein that you should consume

daily. Although spinach is

rich in iron and

calcium, it is also

rich in oxalic acid,

which binds to

these important

nutrients and

prevents the

majority of them

from being absorbed

by the body. However,

oxalic acid does not

interfere with the absorption

of calcium or iron from other

foods that you might be eating

along with your spinach. In order

to ensure that you get the most

nutrients out of your spinach, be sure

to eat it both raw and cooked, since heat

releases some of the nutrients, such as lutein, and destroys others.



Jessica's Spinach & Grape Salad is available in Gelson's service deli.

A serving of spinach is two cups of raw leaves, and one cup of cooked leaves. That small amount contains 80% of your Daily Value (DV) of vitamin A, 30% of your DV for folate, and 30% of your DV for vitamin C.

Spinach is available year-round, and is conveniently available prewashed in bulk, bags and boxes (though, I always like to wash my packaged greens again when I get home). Baby spinach is great for salads and cooking, while mature spinach is mainly used for cooking. Organic spinach is almost always available, so I make that my first choice. When choosing spinach, look for crisp-but-tender emerald-green leaves with slender stems. If the spinach is in a bag, it should feel springy when you squeeze the bag. Pass up spinach that is yellowish or wilted. Store spinach in the plastic bag or box you buy it in, and do not wash it until just before you are ready to prepare it.

All bunched spinach must be washed before you eat it to remove the sand and grit. Trim off any roots and drop the leaves into a big bowl of cool water. Gently swish them around with your hands, then lift them out, let the sand and grit settle, empty and refill the bowl, and repeat the process until the spinach is clean. For crisp spinach salads, dry the spinach in a salad spinner, wrap it in paper towels, and refrigerate it for up to 3 hours. If you are steaming the vegetable, simply cook the damp leaves in a covered pot for 3-5 minutes over medium-high heat.

Alternatively, you can microwave spinach in a loosely covered microwave-safe dish for two minutes for every eight ounces.

This month, try my recipes for Miso and Truffle-Glazed Sea Bass and Spinach with Pine Nuts and Currants.

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