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GREAT NEWS, chocoholics: Your vice may ultimately be considered a virtue. Scientists believe that flavanols, the do-good antioxidants derived from the cocoa bean, may be so potent—with benefits for your brain, heart, and blood pressure, and with the mysterious ability to boost your metabolism—that they could be effective in a pill form. And even better, they do it without adding pesky calories and fat grams, though, alas, lacking that heavenly taste.

Researchers at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and Harvard Medical School recently announced a multi-million dollar study to more accurately gauge the true power of flavanols when consumed in concentrated, capsule form. The clinical trial will test whether the cocoa flavanols reduce the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and heart disease deaths in 18,000 men and women across the country over a four-year period, says epidemiologist Howard D. Sesso, an associate professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and a codirector of the study. While earlier studies have shown that cocoa flavanols have heart-protective benefits (including lowering blood pressure, insulin, and cholesterol levels, as well as improving the ability of blood vessels to dilate), Sesso notes that those trials were small and relatively brief.

But this study isn't the only one focused on previously vilified chocolate these days. Another recent study found that drinking hot chocolate daily enhanced memory function and improved blood flow in the brain. It may also be a way to reduce sun damage: A 2009 study found that high-flavanol chocolate can increase skin's natural UV protection. A growing body of research has even suggested that antioxidants such as those found in chocolate can actually help slash insulin resistance—a mighty unlikely development for a sugary treat.

And then there's perhaps the most delicious cluster of news: how eating chocolate, especially dark chocolate, may help you stay slim. A study at the University of California, San Diego, published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* in 2012, found that people who often ate chocolate had lower body mass indexes

*Everyone's favorite indulgence may actually be so good for you that we'll all soon be popping cocoa capsules. Liz Krieger investigates.*

than those who had it less frequently or not at all. In fact, the people who ate chocolate five times per week were five or more pounds thinner than those who indulged less often. Similarly, a recent Spanish study of nearly 1,500 teenagers found that chocolate eaters had leaner midsections than those who resisted the sweet stuff.

How to explain such a seemingly paradoxical—nay, magical—metabolic effect? Beatrice A. Golomb, an internist and a coauthor of the San Diego study, says that while such a fatty item producing these results is surprising, it dovetails with prior research on how chocolate affects the body in other ways. “The antioxidants and other compounds in chocolate may spur an increase in how you use energy, in part by increasing blood flow and the production of small blood vessels that allow oxygen and nutrients to be delivered better,” Golomb explains. “This may help metabolism.” So, yes, chocolate may be caloric, but it also affects how your body processes all calories.

Then do we have license to down Kisses or gobble Godiva without guilt? To be clear: The amounts of chocolate that people in the study reported eating were well within the moderate range—averaging less than an ounce, or a little less than one square—meaning that all-out binges aren't advisable, and the higher quality the chocolate and the darker it is, the better. Indeed, research has shown that dark chocolate is more filling than milk chocolate, and it can help cut cravings for all kinds of naughty nibbles, whether they're sweet, salty, or fatty.

Still, you don't need to scarf the Scharffen Berger to get the benefits, says nutritionist Lauren Slayton, author of *The Little Book of Thin* and founder of Foodtrainers, a New York weight management and sports nutrition consultancy. Slayton recommends stirring unsweetened cocoa powder into your smoothie, oatmeal, or yogurt to get that powerful antioxidant kick without a ton of extra calories. And when you want the real stuff, she suggests Sweetriot Cacao Nibs, which are perfectly portion-controlled—a one-ounce tin has 140 calories. Pop a tin in your pocket, and consider it your sweet secret weapon. ■