

Grey Area Foods: Chocolate

By: Dominique Martin on May 30th, 2018

The beauty of going Paleo is that it removes the incessant roaming of grocery store aisles by narrowing your shopping list down to simple, whole ingredients and allowing you to eat foods that are in natural alignment with your body system. It's no question that adopting this lifestyle can offer transformational results and gives the body the raw materials it needs to thrive, but no lifestyle change comes without challenges.

Although our hunter-gatherer forefathers set the blueprint for a nutrient-rich diet free of processed foods, dairy, grains and sugar—transitioning into this way of eating may seem restrictive to those who aren't accustomed to food produced by nature and not fabricated by man. Nevertheless—we are all human and a time will come at some point during the transition when you're craving something sweet and indulgent (enter chocolate) and most likely on the Paleo list of grey area foods.

So the question arises of how one can stay within the Paleo realm of eating foods that our body was designed to have and not feel deprived? This article serves the purpose of not only answering that question and highlighting the positives and negatives of this indulgent treat, but reassuring those of you who are new the Paleo way of life that you can still experience the health benefits while occasionally satisfying your sweet tooth.

Will Chocolate Benefit My Health?

How you consume chocolate and where it is sourced from is an essential factor when determining to how it will benefit your health. When sourced from a reputable, fair-trade supplier that uses organic, gluten-free ingredients—chocolate (scientifically known as *Theobroma Cacao*) is deemed a superfood that can boost mood, enhance the immune system, and provide the body with an abundance of necessary nutrients. Not all chocolate is made equal, so let's discuss the positives and negatives to make sure you're choosing your chocolate wisely.

Positives: Chocolate is derived from cocoa beans, but the creation process involves the intermingling of cocoa butter (the fat) and cocoa solids (the residual substances after cocoa butter is extracted from cacao beans) before it can produce the delicious results we've all come to love—and this is where the health benefits come into play:

- ❖ **Cocoa Butter:** An excellent source of essential fatty acids that does wonders for the hair and skin, has a rich blend of antioxidants, and soothes inflammation in the body.
- ❖ **Cocoa Solids:** Contains a significant amount of magnesium, copper, and zinc, provides a mental and emotional boost by heightening serotonin levels, and polyphenols (known as flavonoids) offer the body protection against environmental toxins.
- ❖ **Additional Positives:** Can slow down the aging process by protecting our cells from premature oxidation, assist in shedding fat by shrinking appetite due to cacao's MAO inhibitors, and high magnesium concentration can help with combating fatigue.

Negatives: Although this exotic superfood is pleasing to the taste buds and provides a considerable amount of nutrients that are Paleo-friendly, it's also wise to be mindful of the not-so-super aspects—lest you drift into the Paleo grey zone. Things to consider before you indulge:

- ❖ **Phytic Acid:** A natural substance found in seed plants that impairs mineral absorption by acting as binder—making iron, zinc, calcium, and magnesium unavailable to the body.
- ❖ **Sugar:** Even chocolate in its darkest form contains some amount of sugar (unless it's 85%-100% unsweetened—which will be discussed in the next section). Over-consumption of sugar can lead to conditions like tooth decay, obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.
- ❖ **Additional Negatives:** Contains varying amounts of caffeine which can cause heart palpitations, irritability, insomnia, and an upset stomach if taken in large doses.

Now that you've gained a bit more knowledge of the healthy (and not so healthy) features of chocolate, let's get to the good part and discuss how you should consume this "food of the gods" in order to receive the bountiful health benefits.

What's the Best Way To Consume Chocolate?

In order to reap the benefits of this savory superfood, it's best consumed in its most pure, raw form. This means free of gluten containing grains, dairy, refined sugar, and emulsifiers (food additive used to stabilize chocolate so that it can be molded). Follow these guidelines when making your chocolate selection:

- ❖ **Go For the Highest Percentage:** Chocolate is divided into 5 categories: Unsweetened (85%-100%), Bittersweet (65%-80%), Milk Chocolate (10%-20%), and White Chocolate (0%). Semisweet offers you more sweetness (and it's easier to get down), but staying in the 70% range will give you a dark chocolate that is neither bitter nor overpowering and you won't lose the nutritional value.
- ❖ **Less Is More:** Regardless of the temporary pleasure Reese's Pieces, M&Ms, and Hershey's kisses provide, these varieties are laden with chemicals and diminish the true essence of the cocoa bean—which is delicious all on its own. Aim for varieties that have very little ingredients and sugar. If you see high-fructose corn syrup or artificial sweeteners—then it is definitely NOT Paleo-friendly chocolate.
- ❖ **Always Choose Organic:** Choosing organic chocolate ensures that you are feeding your body pure, nutrient-rich chocolate. Conventional crops are grown using a heavy dose of pesticides, so try to stick to brands that use sustainable practices and simple ingredients. **Green and Blacks 85% Dark, Lulu's Love Truffles, and Righteously Raw Maca Superfood Bar** rank high on the Paleo-approved chocolate bar list.

The Indulgence Verdict

Before you head to the market or Amazon to browse the mounds of chocolate joy, keep in mind that it's completely okay to incorporate this not-so-forbidden treat in to your Paleo diet—as long as it's done in moderation. The Paleo lifestyle is more about putting foods into your body that compliment rather than restrict. Always make sure that your foundational Paleo food needs are met first, but don't forget to indulge in a little sweetness as you journey to a healthier, more vibrant YOU.