



### Some classic 'bad' foods undergo an image upgrade

It appears to be human nature to label foods as "good" or "bad" with little or no scientific evidence. Now many "bad" foods are changing their image.

**Question:** How can coffee, tea and cocoa be touted for their antioxidants when they contain caffeine?

**Answer:** Certainly, caffeine has drug-like effects. However, like all drugs, the potential significance of these effects depends on the dose.

Research from the French National Health and Medical Research Institute indicates that the caffeine in up to three cups of coffee per day does not cause the type of drug dependence seen with addictive drugs.

Benefits of caffeine include enhancing alertness and mood. Caffeine also appears to lower the incidence of gallstone disease by stimulating gallbladder contractions. Gallstone formation is a fairly common complication for people on low-calorie diets, especially when the diet is low in fat. Weight-loss diets might benefit from the addition of coffee and tea.

Claims that beverages containing caffeine cause dehydration, high blood pressure, fibrocystic breast disease or any type of can-

cer have all failed to be proven in the court of science. Even caffeine's effect on blood pressure is a nonissue for most people; climbing stairs and other normal daily activities raise blood pressure more than caffeine.

**Q:** Isn't chocolate high in fat and sugar?

**A:** Chocolate is clearly not a low-calorie diet food, but it has some redeeming factors. The type of fat in chocolate has neutral effects on blood cholesterol. Also, 2 ounces of dark chocolate contain an amount of beneficial polyphenols similar to a cup of green tea. The downside of 2 ounces of chocolate is that it contains more than 250 calories, compared to zero calories for tea.

**Q:** Are the reports about the benefits of drinking moderate amounts of wine and alcohol real?

**A:** Red wine in particular has been getting good press because it contains significant amounts of the polyphenol compounds found in fruits, coffee, tea and chocolate. However, alcohol by itself can decrease the risk of heart disease by increasing the "good" HDL cholesterol levels and reducing blood clotting. Of course, moderate use is the key.

**Q:** How can high-fat fish be

beneficial?

**A:** The fat in most fish is especially high in essential fatty acids that are required by the body. Because of the concentration of good fatty acids in fish, even high-fat salmon can provide health benefits.

**Q:** Aren't eggs still considered too high in cholesterol?

**A:** In the strictest statistical sense, cholesterol in the diet has an effect on blood cholesterol, but this effect is rather minor in most people. A study of 12,553 men in the Multiple Risk Factor Intervention Trial found no relationship between egg intake, dietary cholesterol and blood-cholesterol levels. Two other U.S. studies on 43,757 male health professionals and on 80,082 female nurses found that the intake of dietary cholesterol was unrelated to heart disease.

High rates of heart disease are not found in those who eat the most eggs. Japanese eat about 50 percent more eggs than Americans but have less heart disease.

The bottom line is that single foods don't make a diet good or bad. Rather, it is proportions and the sum of all the parts that matter.

---

Alan Titchenal, Ph.D, CNS and Joannie Dobbs, Ph.D, CNS  
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,  
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.  
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.

---