

## 9 Proven Brain Benefits of Dark Chocolate

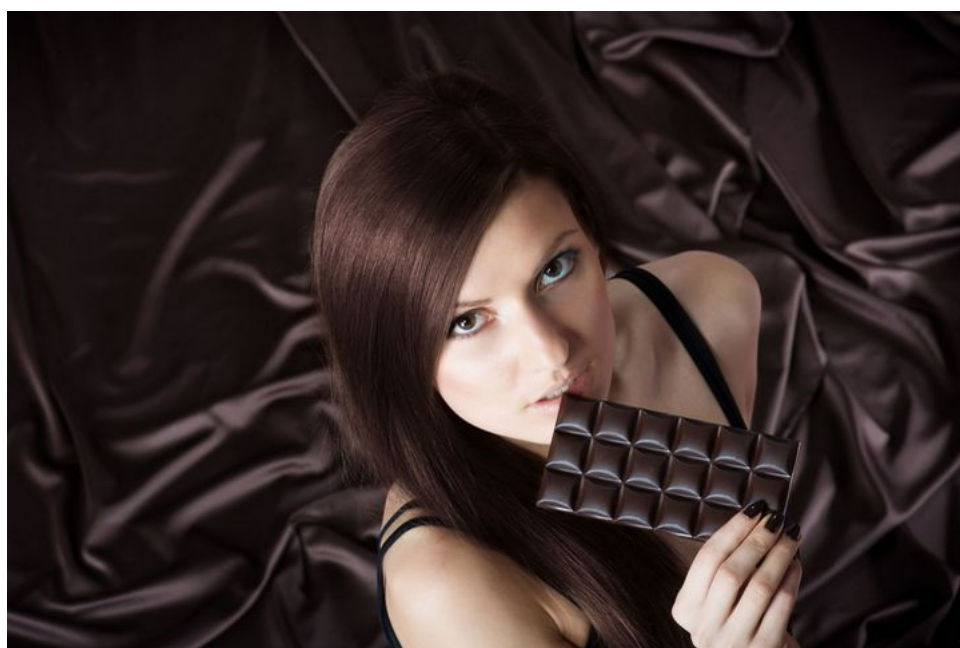
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**Dark chocolate boosts mood, protects the brain, improves memory and focus, & more. Learn the benefits of cacao nibs and how to choose good dark chocolate.**

**What You'll Learn Here** 



*“All you need is love. But a little chocolate now and then doesn’t hurt.”*

— Charles M. Schulz

The world loves chocolate.

Americans eat 3 billion pounds of it every year.

But US consumption lags far behind that of the top chocolate-loving countries like Switzerland, Germany, and Great Britain. [\(1\)](#)

We love chocolate not just because of the way it tastes.

We love it because of the way it makes us feel.

It’s rare that something so downright delicious is also good for you, but dark chocolate is an exception to the rule.

You’ll find dark chocolate at the top of any brain foods list.

Let’s take a look at 9 proven ways chocolate positively affects brain health and function.


### 1. Eating Dark Chocolate Can Make You Happy

Dark chocolate boosts the production of feel-good chemicals called endorphins. (2)

**Endorphins** bind with opiate receptors in the brain leading to feelings of euphoria, like the kind joggers get from “runner’s high.”

They also reduce pain and diminish the negative effects of stress. (3)

Chocolate is a top dietary source of tryptophan, an amino acid precursor to serotonin, the neurotransmitter of happiness and positive mood.

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Chocolate is the main food source of *anandamide*, a naturally occurring compound called the “bliss molecule.” (4)

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This neurotransmitter is very similar to THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the primary psychoactive component in marijuana. (5)

Dark chocolate also contains phenylethylamine, a compound called the “love drug” because it creates a brain buzz similar to being in love. (6)

Theobromine, a compound found in chocolate that’s related to caffeine, is thought to make chocolate a mild aphrodisiac. (7)

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*Dr. Pat | Be Brain Fit*

## 2. Dark Chocolate Improves Blood Flow to the Brain

Compounds in dark chocolate boost memory, attention span, reaction time, and problem-solving skills by increasing blood flow to the brain. (8)

The [flavonoids](#) in chocolate have been shown to improve blood flow to the brain in young and old alike.

In one study, a single dose of flavanol-rich cocoa increased blood flow to the brain in healthy, young adults. (9)

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[\*\*\*How to Increase Blood Flow to the Brain\*\*\*](#)

A Harvard Medical School study found that drinking two cups of hot chocolate increased blood flow to the brain for 2-3 hours.

This blood flow boost improved scores on a working memory speed test by 30%. (10)

Increased cerebral flow may help prevent mental decline in seniors. (11)

## 3. Antioxidants in Chocolate Neutralize Free Radical Damage

Your brain uses a lot of oxygen, about 20% of the body's total intake.

This makes your brain highly susceptible to free radical damage.

Free radicals are unattached oxygen molecules that attack your cells in much the same way that oxygen attacks metal, causing it to rust.

If you've ever seen a sliced apple or avocado turn brown, you've seen free radicals at work.

Wrinkles, age spots, and sun damage on your skin are visible signs of free radical damage.

The same process is going on inside your brain.

Antioxidants protect brain cells by neutralizing free radical damage and preventing premature brain cell aging.

Cocoa powder contains more antioxidants than other superfoods such as acai, blueberry, and pomegranate powders. (12)

When tested against coffee and tea, cocoa powder drink exhibited more antioxidant activity than green tea, but less than coffee. (13)

## 4. Dark Chocolate Improves Learning, Memory, and Focus

Cocoa's flavonoids penetrate and accumulate in the brain regions involved in learning and memory, especially the hippocampus. (14)

Seniors who consume foods high in flavonoids, including chocolate, score better on standardized cognitive tests. (15)

Chocolate also contains some caffeine, a known brain booster that in low doses improves memory, mood, and concentration. (16, 17)



How much caffeine does dark chocolate have compared to coffee and tea?

According to [Caffeine Informer](#), Ghirardelli 60% cacao dark chocolate contains about 30 mg of caffeine per ounce, while Hershey's cocoa powder contains 48 mg per ounce.

Green tea contains 25 mg and brewed coffee contains 64-272 mg per eight ounces.

You can see that the caffeine in a normal size serving of chocolate is relatively low.

So, most likely, eating chocolate won't make you wired or keep you up at night.

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## **5. Magnesium Found in Dark Chocolate Relieves Stress**

Magnesium is so good at helping you relax that it's been dubbed the "original chill pill."

This essential mineral reduces stress by suppressing the release of the stress hormone cortisol. (18)

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Magnesium is largely missing from our diets, but chocolate contains a substantial amount of it. (19, 20)

It's generally thought that we crave chocolate for its magnesium.

Getting more magnesium from chocolate can improve memory, focus, mood, sleep, and resilience to stress. (21)

## **6. Dark Chocolate Helps Control Food Cravings**

Chocolate is the most widely craved food. (22)

But indulging in cheap, mass-produced chocolate doesn't reduce cravings.

In fact, it fuels them.

On the other hand, high-quality dark chocolate is extremely satisfying, so you may find that you're satisfied eating less of it.

Eating a little dark chocolate has been shown to reduce cravings for junk food of all kinds — sweet, salty, and fatty. (23)

Consequently, it can help you make healthy food choices, cut calories, and lose weight.

Is all this satisfaction due to chocolate's unique profile of [phytochemicals](#)?

Or is there a psychological aspect to our love affair with chocolate?

Interestingly, it seems that the sensory experience of eating dark chocolate is an important part of its ability to satisfy cravings.

When scientists put the beneficial ingredients of chocolate in a pill, it did not have the same effect. (24)

## 7. Dark Chocolate Protects Your Brain for a Lifetime

There have been many exciting findings surrounding chocolate's use in treating brain-related medical conditions like strokes and dementia.

The powerful antioxidants found in dark chocolate reduce the risk of dementia.

According to one study, the more chocolate seniors ate, the less likely they were to develop dementia. (25)

Chocolate's flavanols improved cognition in seniors diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment (MCI). (26)

Dark chocolate decreases insulin resistance.

This is significant because many experts believe Alzheimer's is a disease of insulin resistance — a form of diabetes of the brain. (27)

When brain cells become insulin-resistant, they don't get the glucose they need, and subsequently die.

The consumption of flavonoid-rich foods like cocoa holds the potential to limit, prevent, or reverse age-related brain deterioration. (28, 29)

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## 8. Dark Chocolate Supports Good Gut Bacteria

One of the most unusual dark chocolate health benefits is that it increases beneficial bacteria in your intestines. (30)

And yes, this is good news for your brain!

Lactobacilli and Bifidobacteria are two of the most prevalent “good” bacteria in your gut and are found in most probiotic supplements.

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They act as antioxidants, protecting your brain from free radical damage. (31)

Chocolate acts as a prebiotic, keeping good bacteria levels high and “bad” bacteria in check.

An overabundance of bad bacteria can lower levels of **brain-derived neurotrophic factor** (BDNF). (32)

This important brain chemical is essential for keeping existing brain cells healthy and stimulating the formation of new brain cells.

## 9. Eating Dark Chocolate Can Make You Smarter

You’ve already seen that eating chocolate can improve your ability to learn, focus, and remember.

One study reports that the more chocolate a country consumes, the more Nobel prize winners it has!

While this may sound like a joke, the [study](#) was published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, a prestigious organization not known for pranks.

But seriously, eating chocolate has been shown to be neuroprotective and enhance brain plasticity, a trait that’s linked to increased intelligence. (33)

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## How to Get Maximum Brain Benefits from Chocolate

For maximum brain benefits of chocolate, the darker it is, the better.

Compared to milk chocolate, dark chocolate contains more of the things that are good for you, like flavonoids and antioxidants, and less of the things that aren’t, like sugar. (34)

It’s believed that the dairy in milk chocolate could interfere with flavonoid absorption, but, so far, studies have been inconclusive. (35)

### What the Numbers on Dark Chocolate Labels Mean

When you see a number like 70% on a bar of dark chocolate, this indicates the total percentage of everything derived from the cocoa bean — chocolate liquor, cocoa butter, and cocoa powder.

In general, 70% is a good place to start for any significant health benefits.

If you really don't like 70%, start around 50% and work your way up.

Like many of the finer things in life, eating very dark chocolate can be an acquired taste.

**Note:** *The terms cacao and cocoa are often used interchangeably on labels. Cacao is the name of the bean from which chocolate is made. Cocoa refers to the processed final product.* (36)

### Should You Buy Organic Dark Chocolate?

I've seen several websites mention that cacao is heavily sprayed with pesticides making it one of the most chemical-laden food crops.

But I haven't found any reliable data to back this up or to show how much of a health concern this is for the consumer.

However, organic is usually a good indicator of overall quality.

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Truly healthy dark chocolate will contain only a handful of ingredients.

It won't contain high fructose corn syrup, chemical additives, partially hydrogenated oil, artificial color or flavoring, or any other artificial ingredients.

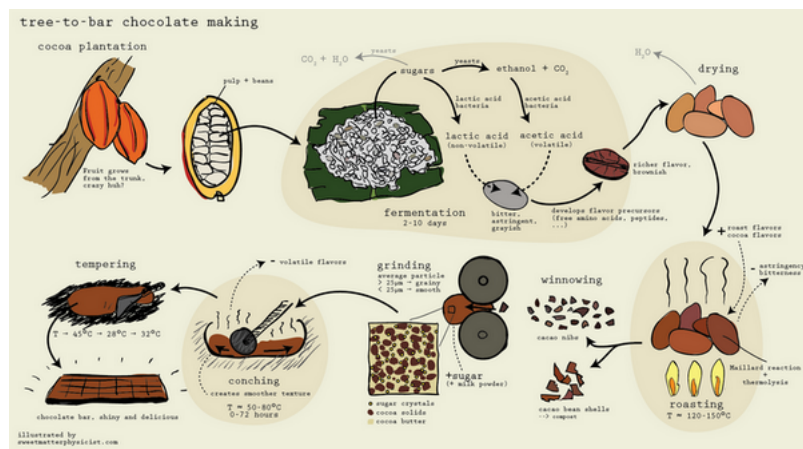
Additionally, you may notice the words "fair trade" on chocolate labels.

Fair Trade certification ensures that farmers receive a fair price and that no slave or child labor was used. (37)

### Cacao Nibs: A Less Processed Alternative to Chocolate

The creation of chocolate from "beans to bar" requires *a lot* of steps.

But you can cut out most of them by eating cacao nibs.



How chocolate is made.

Image courtesy of [SweetMatterPhysicist.com](#)

A precursor to chocolate, cacao nibs are significantly less processed and contain no sugar, making them superior to chocolate candy bars in almost every way.

They are quite tasty — nutty and slightly sweet and less bitter than very dark chocolate.

I like to call cacao nibs "nature's chocolate chips."

You can eat them as-is for a handy, brain-healthy snack or add them to other foods.

Use them in sweet treats wherever you use chocolate chips or nuts.

Add them to your favorite trail mix or nut mix — they don't melt like chocolate chips.

You may have already tried cacao nibs without knowing it since cocoa powder is basically finely ground cacao nibs.

### Brain Benefits of Dark Chocolate: Take the Next Step

Dark chocolate truly deserves the title “brain food.”

It can improve your overall brain health, focus, and concentration, and even make you happier.

It protects your brain against aging and oxidation, and helps to keep it fit and fully functioning for a lifetime.

To get the most mental health benefits, choose the darkest chocolate that you enjoy.

Or, for a change of pace, consider giving cacao nibs a try.

They are significantly less processed than chocolate and have no added sugar.

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