

HEALTHY LIVING

A dose of skepticism

Author disputes dark chocolate and other medical claims

BY HELENA OLIVIERO
Cox News Service

For dark-chocolate lovers, the medical study findings couldn't have been more delicious: Their guilty pleasure can ward off heart disease.

But if it sounds too sweet to be true, it is. The logic doesn't just melt in your mouth: It melts under the skeptical eye of Robert Davis, Atlanta author of the new book "The Healthy Skeptic" (University of California Press, \$21.95).

"The truth is that there have been small, short-term studies suggesting dark chocolate in large quantities may have some short-term, positive effects on the cardiovascular system, but it's unclear whether there are any long-term benefits, and that's what counts," says Davis, a health journalist who teaches at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health. "It gets translated to say dark chocolate is good for you, and that is a huge exaggeration of the truth."

Based on other studies, chocolate, blueberries, almonds and even onions have catapulted to celebrity status, thanks to marketing, media and eager consumers, notes Davis, who urges a more critical eye.

"It's an alluring story, but if we hear one food has miraculous powers, we have to stop and think, 'This is too good to be true.' No food by itself has that kind of power," he says.

On the flip side, a study that suggested hair coloring could cause leukemia shouldn't set off a panic either, he says. In the end, use common sense, he advises.

"Don't smoke, and have a healthy diet and don't get bogged down by worrying about one food or another or worrying about using hair dye. These little nuggets of information can overwhelm us, and we lose sight of the big picture."

We recently caught up with Davis to ask him about some popular medical claims. ■

The claim:**Dark chocolate prevents heart disease**

The Healthy Skeptic: Small, short-term studies — virtually all of them funded by the chocolate-candy industry — suggest dark chocolate, which contains antioxidants known as flavanols, may have some beneficial effects on your cardiovascular system when consumed in large quantities. This doesn't mean you are less likely to have a heart attack 10 or 20 years down the line.

Bottom line: There's no evidence a little chocolate now and then is bad for you. But remember: Chocolate should be viewed as candy — not medicine. ■

**The claim:****Blueberries will prevent Alzheimer's**

The Healthy Skeptic: Blueberries have antioxidants. They are perfectly good to eat and one of the many fruits we should eat, but there's no basis to suggest that blueberries are better for you than strawberries or watermelon or that it will prevent Alzheimer's.

Bottom line: Stop fixating on any one fruit and focus on your overall diet and getting a variety of fruits and vegetables. ■

**The claim:****Red wine is good for your heart**

The Healthy Skeptic: There is some evidence that a glass of wine every night may be good for your heart, but the risk of drinking too much is far greater than drinking just the right amount.

Bottom line: If you want to drink a glass or two of wine, that's fine and it may be beneficial, but any more is probably not a good idea. ■



What makes gloomy people so miserable?

BY HAP LECRONE
Cox News Service

DEAR DR. LeCRONE: I have a neighbor who seems to be the unhappiest person in the world.

Nothing seems to please her; she never smiles and always seems to be in a bad mood. If I tell her that her yard is pretty, her reply is something like, "My water bill is so high that the yard better look good," or if I say it's a beautiful day, she says, "Well, it won't be long till bad weather comes." If I tell her she looks nice, she may say, "Well, I hurt all over, so don't judge a book by its cover."

Life for her is one tragedy after another and she always seems troubled. Please discuss people like this in your column.

— A reader in Oregon

DEAR READER: People who are

gloomy, grumpy and griping can be unpleasant to be around. These unhappy individuals thrive on the negative and let their pessimistic outlook completely pervade their thinking. Happiness is rare for them, and when it does occur, it is often short lived.

It is no surprise, therefore, that they frequently suffer from depression, social isolation and difficulty in establishing and maintaining meaningful relationships.

Often, constant worriers are filled with anxiety, and have a strong need to be subservient and apologetic. They also may harbor a great deal of hostility, and guilt is sometimes a part of their psychological makeup.



Their sour, dour and unpleasant disposition often correlates with a poor self-concept. They are generally lacking in self-confidence, and their negative outlook frequently leads to a self-fulfilling prophecy. They believe that things won't turn out right; therefore, things don't.

These individuals often go through life missing wonderful experiences, frequently knowing that there is another world out there, but they feel afraid and are unable to make the step toward a different kind of life.

Some of them develop their outlook as a result of a very unhappy childhood. For them, physical and psychological abuse often took the form of neglect,

harsh criticism and a lack of unconditional love.

Learning to change long-standing undesirable behavior and accompanying feelings is often difficult and takes time. Frequently, when we examine ourselves in an objective way, we are seeking to change things that we don't like about ourselves and that are difficult to accept. Deciding to cease being a sufferer is not an insurmountable problem, but it must be recognized as a problem before any change can occur.

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