Cocoa Found to Preserve Blood Vessel Health as We Age

By Greg Arnold, DC, CSCS, August 3, 2006, abstracted from “Aging and vascular responses to flavanol-rich cocoa” in the August 2006 issue of the Journal of Hypertension

Aging can bring about many heart-related diseases, including heart disease, stroke, and high blood pressure. A common denominator among these conditions is reduced blood vessel health, particularly the innermost layer of the blood vessel called the endothelium and a reduced ability to relax, also known as dilation.

Unfortunately, research has yet to definitely find ways to help preserve blood vessel health and “potential corrective therapies are unknown.” However, a new study has found a potential therapy to enhance blood vessel health in the form of cocoa, which has recently been found to help maintain both heart health and skin health.

Previous research has found that cocoa is rich in antioxidants called flavanols, which improve blood vessel function in healthy people. Building upon these findings, researchers divided 34 healthy men and women into two groups based upon age: a younger group (under 50) of 15 patients and an older group (over 50) of 19 patients. They then took either 821 mg per day of cocoa or placebo for six days. During this period, researchers checked their blood pressure and other markers of blood vessel health, including nitric oxide (NO), which dilates blood vessels but decreases as we age. To see if cocoa plays any role in NO production, researchers injected 12 patients with L-NAME, known to inhibit NO production.

At the end of six days, researchers found a “significant increase” of both blood vessel dilation and blood flow in the cocoa group compared to the controls. These results were not seen in the L-NAME group, showing that cocoa enhances blood vessel health by increasing NO levels. These results back up previous research showing that cocoa increases NO production.

For the researchers, “flavanol-rich cocoa enhanced several measures of endothelial function” and “our data suggest that [cocoa’s effect on NO levels] may be greater among older people, in whom endothelial function is more disturbed.”

Greg Arnold is a Chiropractic Physician practicing in Danville, CA. You can contact Dr. Arnold directly by emailing him at PitchingDoc@msn.com or visiting his website www.PitchingDoc.com

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