

BenAlert

BENEFIT TRENDS AND LEGISLATIVE UPDATES

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Howitt Benefit Services is pleased to provide you with periodic updates on benefit trends and legislative updates. As part of our valuable services, we want to ensure that you are in compliance and well-informed of the ongoing changes in our industry.

In this BenAlert:

- The Health Benefits of Dark Chocolate

by Betty Long, RN

Statistics After My Own Heart

Thanks to Valentine's Day, February and hearts seem like a no-brainer to most Americans. Men and women in love spend time, money and energy buying gifts – often chocolate and wrapped in red cellophane – for the ones they love.

It makes sense, then, that in 1963 Congress passed a resolution that requires the president to proclaim February as American Heart Month. But Congress wasn't interested in promoting love or passion.

Rather, cardiovascular disease – including heart attack, stroke and high blood pressure – was the nation's No. 1 killer in 1963, and it still is today, despite our best technology and pharmacology. According to the American Heart Association, an estimated 80 million people in our country have cardiovascular disease. That's one in three. Those are Hall of Fame numbers if you're Alex Rodriguez, but not so good if you're a 62-year-old couch potato.

The Milken Institute's 2007 report "An Unhealthy America: Economic Burden of Chronic Disease," estimated that heart disease treatment expenditures in 2010 will total \$95 billion dollars. The estimated indirect costs of lost work productivity in 2010 are almost double that at \$165 billion dollars! As a human resources professional, that should get your attention.

The Benefits of Dark Chocolate

So what do you do if you're trying to get your employees' or your loved one's attention surrounding heart disease? Like any good Valentine's Day gift-giver, give them chocolate.

But not just any chocolate. Dark chocolate has lots of epicatechins, a particularly active member of a group of compounds called plant flavonoids. Flavonoids have been proven to keep cholesterol from gathering in blood vessels, reduce the risk of blood clots and slow down the immune responses that lead to clogged arteries. They are also the same compounds found in red wine that give it its antioxidant properties.

Dark chocolate contains a lot more cocoa, and thus flavonoids, than other forms of chocolate. The principal ingredient of commercial chocolate bars is not cocoa, but sugar, along with saturated vegetable fat and powdered milk. In addition, standard chocolate manufacturing, where the product is heated, destroys up to half the flavonoids (think of the nutritional difference between cooked spinach and raw spinach).

But there are companies that have learned to make dark chocolate that keeps up to 95% of its flavonoids. This version contains higher percentages of cocoa solids and lower percentages of sugar.

We don't often think of this, but chocolate is derived from a plant, the *Theobroma cacao* plant. And it has more flavonoids than green tea, black tea, red wine and blueberries. Recommendations for eating a colorful assortment of fruits and vegetables can now include dark chocolate – think of the possibilities!

While a little dark chocolate is good, a lot is not necessarily better. Let's not forget that chocolate still is loaded with calories. If you're going to eat more chocolate, you'll have to cut back somewhere else. And remember, there are no quick fixes. A balanced diet, plenty of exercise, not smoking and maintaining a normal, healthy weight are still the main ingredients to a healthy life.

We've come a long way in our country since 1963, but it is disheartening to know that 47 years later, our basic heart health has not improved. While fewer of us smoke, we have become more sedentary, more overweight, more stressed and ultimately, less healthy. Why else, then, would cardiovascular disease still be lurking as our No. 1 killer?

So, in honor of Valentine's Day and American Heart Month, think about the impact that cardiovascular disease has had on your workforce, in your life, in the lives of the people you love, and on our country as a whole. Don't put off your plans to initiate a wellness program. Invite local nursing students in to have a "Blood Pressure Check" day for your employees. Enforce nonsmoking bans in the workplace. Reach out to the American Heart Association for additional resources. And buy yourself and your special someone a nice piece of dark chocolate, preferably one with at least 60% cacao.



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