

HEDGDEROW HERBALS

The quarterly newsletter from your local herbalist - Julie Dore
Articles, news, recipes and tips for a healthy you

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FREE

Welcome to the spring edition which includes information on coping with hay fever and exams and why it's OK to eat chocolate (in moderation of course!)

Easter

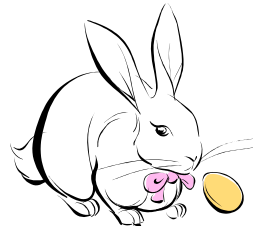
I have to confess spring and Easter are my favourite time of year - daffodils, lambs, spring sunshine and of course Easter eggs. Chocolate is



after all one of the new healthy wonder foods – well, some types are! So read on to find out how you too can have guilt free Easter. I should point out before you get too excited that to be good, chocolate has to be dark. All that milky stuff is full of fat and sugar and not very much chocolate. You need to eat chocolate with 70%+ cocoa solids.

Chocolate use in South America predates the great civilisations of both the Mayans and Aztecs, the latter calling it the "food of the gods" (maybe that should have been goddesses?). Indeed its Latin name is *Theobroma cacao*, theobroma meaning food of the gods. It was prized for its mystical and medicinal properties and was so valuable the cocoa beans were used by the Aztecs as currency. They ground the fermented beans into a bitter drink often mixed with chilli, pimento or vanilla. The name chocolate comes from the Aztec word *xocatl* (pronounced *tchocolatl*) meaning "bitter water". The Mayans believed it brought knowledge and good judgement and the pod was their symbol of fertility. The Aztecs thought it provided spiritual wisdom, energy, vitality and enhanced sexual prowess. It was a drink reserved for the higher classes and thought too powerful an aphrodisiac to be given to women (!) except to aid

conception and hasten childbirth. It was said to help the weak and debilitated put on weight and was used to cure diarrhoea and dysentery. Cortes, the Aztec conqueror, brought the beans to Europe in the 1500s where the bitter drink was used to treat anaemia, gout, haemorrhoids, poor digestion, depression and heart ailments. It was not until 1822 that the Dutch developed a new process that enabled the cocoa solids to be mixed with sugar and milk and pressed into a bar that it became the chocolate treat we know today. So what are the health benefits?



Chocolate contains naturally occurring antioxidants known as flavanols. They are also found in green tea, berries, grapes and red wine, but chocolate contains more per gram than any of these! The flavanols have several heart protecting effects including:

- ❖ lowering blood pressure
- ❖ stabilising blood sugars so you do not feel hungry and overeat
- ❖ reducing blood clotting (one study compared drinking a flavanol rich cocoa drink with taking a low-dose aspirin both as effective in reducing the likelihood of clots although the effect of the aspirin lasted longer)
- ❖ preventing fats in the blood from oxidising and clogging arteries
- ❖ helps the processing of nitric oxide, a compound vital for healthy blood flow

Chocolate does contain the stimulants caffeine, theobromine and tyramine - so don't eat too much before bed. (A 100g bar contains the equivalent amount of caffeine to a cup of instant coffee). Theobromine is a mild anti-depressant; promoting a positive mental attitude and helping you stay alert. Another substance, tryptophan, lessens anxiety by producing the neurotransmitter serotonin. Anandamide mimics the effects of marijuana and promotes relaxation but don't tell anyone or it will get banned – (although you would need to eat 25 lbs of chocolate to get a high equivalent to smoking a joint). Penylethylamine (PEA) boosts endorphins in the brain to give you a high and reduce your sensitivity to pain. PEA is normally released in the brain at times of emotional arousal so maybe that's why the tradition started of giving your lover chocolates. However some of the high comes from the sugar rush you get, especially with conventional milk chocolate, and this is a short-lived effect that can have unhealthy effects on our bodies (see winter 2005 & 2006 newsletters).

Dark chocolate is also a useful source of iron, the highest natural source of magnesium and contains protein potassium, calcium and vitamins A, B1, C, D and E. Women with PMT often find adding magnesium to their diet helps increase pre-menstrual progesterone so alleviating the mood swings. And it is high in calories, making it a vital survival food for trekkers and climbers.

The bad effects of eating chocolate are overstated. Two separate studies failed to find any link between eating chocolate and acne. Indeed many other studies show this distressing condition is not primarily linked to diet. Chocolate does not cause tooth decay. Rather, coca butter coats teeth and may prevent plaque from forming, although the sugar is a culprit. Chocolate bars do contain saturated fat, linked to cholesterol and heart disease but an American study demonstrated that a group eating a chocolate bar had higher good cholesterol (HDL) and lower triglycerides (another "bad" heart fat) than a group given a chocolate-free snack bar. The fat in cocoa butter comprises oleic acid (a monosaturated fat like olive oil – good for the heart) and stearic and palmitic acids which are saturated fats although only palmitic effects cholesterol in the body.

For my money the best healthy chocolate is Green & Black's dark chocolate, with the added bonus that it is organic and ethically sourced. (*Note to Husband –they do eggs now*) So enjoy moderate portions of top quality chocolate (and with 70%+ you don't need much) and eat other flavonoid-rich foods like green tea, red wine, apples, blueberries, strawberries and many other fruit and vegetables.

Hay Fever Time



Eyebright *Euphrasia officinalis* – relieves itching eyes

For many of us spring heralds the promise of summer, warmer weather and outdoor fun but for others it promises violent sneezing, a blocked nose, itchy, watery eyes, tickly throat and ears and wheezing - the hay fever season. This allergic response is caused by a hypersensitivity to certain pollens or mould spores and, depending on which type you are sensitive to, determines at what time of the year you suffer symptoms. Tree pollens build up in mid-spring, followed by grass pollens from late-spring to mid summer and weed pollen from mid-summer to early autumn. Allergies to mould spores occur in late summer to late autumn as the wheat and rape is being harvested. If you are allergic to more than one type, your symptoms could last for several months.

Avoid going outside when pollen levels peak during the early morning and evening and close windows especially in the bedroom and when driving. Wear wrap-around sunglasses to limit pollen getting into your eyes. Always leave mowing the grass to a non-suffering member of the family and stay indoors while it's being done. A tip to reduce the amounts of pollen travelling up the nasal passages and triggering an attack is to apply a small quantity of Vaseline inside each nostril to trap them. Cats and dogs carry pollen on

their coats so keep them away from your face and try regular bathing remove the pollen or wiping their coats with a damp cloth (good luck trying that tip with your cat!). You can reduce sensitivity to pollen by eating a couple of dessert spoons daily of locally made honey, but start 3-4 weeks before your hay fever season. Also cut back on dairy foods, as these are mucus forming. Vitamin C is a natural anti-histamine, take a daily dose of 500-1000mg or better still eat lots of fruit and vegetables.



Spring nettles *Urtica dioica*

Nettles are also a natural anti-histamine and can be taken as a tea or juice to curb the hypersensitivity. Combine with herbs such as eyebright to soothe itching eyes, plantain to tone nasal membranes and elderflower to reduce mucus to help relieve symptoms (This combination is found in *Hedgerow Herbals Sniffless tea blend*). If your symptoms are very severe a medical herbalist can prescribe stronger anti-histamine herbs such as Ephedra, after checking that you do not suffer from high blood pressure which they can then monitor for you. An infusion of eyebright is very soothing to relieve itching eyes. Strain the infusion and allow to cool, dipping cotton wool pads in the liquid and bathe the eyes.

However, when using natural remedies you should start taking them a couple of weeks before your symptoms would normally begin to build up resistance. Herbs will not make you drowsy, as some over the counter remedies do, leaving you able to fully enjoy spring!

Elderflower Spritzer

Place a head of fresh elderflowers and slice of lemon in a bowl and pour over 100ml of boiling water. Add a teaspoon of honey, cover and leave to cool. Strain into a tall glass, add ice and 100ml of fizzy water and serve immediately. A delicious anti-hay fever drink.

How to Survive the Exam Season



Chamomile

You can use herbs to relieve the stress of the exam season and even to boost brain performance. To calm those stomach butterflies, take a cup of chamomile tea. It's also the best thing to take before bed to get a good night before the big day. For extra relaxation combine them with lime flowers. Can't sleep? Try valerian root, passionflower or wild lettuce. Lack of sleep can deplete brain and memory efficiency, so get 7-8 hours each night leading up to and during the exams.

When you are revising pick fresh lemon balm from the garden to make a soothing, uplifting brew. Alternatively put a few drops of Rosemary essential oil on a tissue and sniff whilst revising to improve blood circulation to the brain (*do not use if you suffer from high blood pressure*) and use again in the exam itself to enhance recall. Gingko biloba is also reported to improve memory by improving blood circulation in the brain but you need to start taking it several weeks beforehand to have any effect (*do not use if you are taking anti-coagulant medication*). Ginseng has similar benefits, improving alertness and concentration, while helping to ease feelings of stress and depression (again, *do not use if you have high blood pressure*).

Brain boosting foods

Vitamin B complex (especially folic acid), B6 and B12, zinc, iron, choline, tyrosine and omega 3 essential fatty acid are the key brain boosting nutrients. A marmite sandwich made with whole grain bread will provide a day's supply of folic acid whilst sardines on whole grain toast will provide the omega 3, iron and zinc. For your intake of the other B vitamins, have a fortified breakfast cereal, bananas, baked beans, nuts, seeds, eggs or yoghurt. Zinc is also found in meat, shellfish and cheese, plus pumpkin seeds - a great

snack to nibble on instead of unhealthy crisps. Good sources of iron are meat, (including the dark meat of chicken if you do not eat red meat), dark leafy greens, eggs and fortified cereals. Choline is found in fish and is needed by the body to make acetylcholine, vital for the rapid functioning of memory. Tyrosine is an amino acid found in dairy products and seafood and it helps nourish the brain and nervous system.

Basil is said to clarify the mind so snack on pasta in pesto sauce. The slow release energy from the pasta will sustain you through a heavy study session or exam. Try a smoothie using strawberries and blueberries as studies have shown these fruits improve concentration and short term memory. Ditch the caffeine (especially the Red Bull) and sugary foods as they stress your body even more. Good snack choices include dried fruit and nuts, a bowl of sugar free cereal or a banana. Eating a salad with lots of lettuce and celery is an effective stress reliever as they contain sedative chemicals called lactucarium and phthalide respectively. Doing 30 minutes of physical exercise 5 times a week is another good stress reliever and being active increases the supply of oxygen and nutrients reaching the brain which theorists believe makes the brain more receptive to learning and retaining information.

You should eat small meals of complex carbohydrates, such as whole grain breads, cereals, rice or pasta, with protein. The brain uses only glucose as a fuel and ideally you should maintain a constant level in the blood which is why sugary foods disrupt this balance and stress the body. You get a temporary surge of blood glucose followed by a slump as the body struggles to equalise levels. This surge and slump leads to an inconsistent supply of energy to the brain that can cloud mental activity. When you are studying, it is best to eat small meals, as suggested above, every two to three hours. As it is also beneficial to take a regular break from study, getting up and preparing your sardines on toast will give you a double

benefit. Alcohol and smoking (although if you do I agree trying to stop at this stressful time is not a good idea-promise you'll give up afterwards) sap energy from the brain by damaging brain cells and inhibiting the absorption of vital minerals – so save the drinking until the end of exams celebration.

Always have a good breakfast on the morning of the exam to improve performance. Studies at Loughborough University found porridge to be the best energy boosting food, sustaining people even better than commercial sports drinks to give a long-lasting energy supply. Protein for breakfast has also been shown to improve exam performance e.g. egg and grilled bacon or beans on toast. And don't forget to drink plenty of water as even mild dehydration causes headaches, reduces concentration and increases tension, three things to avoid on the big day. Chewing is reported to aid memory recall so take some gum in with you but not noisy, crunchy sweets that will disturb your fellow examinees. Relax, take a deep breath, turn over the paper and do your best. GOOD LUCK



DIARY DATES

Meet me on one of my plant safaris this summer when I will be telling you about the medicinal uses and folklore of plants growing at these delightful natural areas.

Sunday 13th May 2-4pm Fowlmere
RSPB Reserve FREE

Sunday 21st May 2-4pm RSPB HQ @
Sandy (entrance fee will apply)

Saturday 17th June 2-4pm Wicken Fen
(fee depending on National Trust membership)

Visit the Hedgerow Herbals website www.hedgerow-herbals.co.uk.
For advice, comments or topics you would like to see in future newsletters contact **Julie Dore** at either **Physic Oakington Therapy Centre Oakington Road, Girton, CB3 0QH**. Telephone 01223 237459, or email reception@physic.co.uk. **OR** Lasting Impressions 24 High Street Ramsey. Telephone 0870 1635110