

Looking for Love? UNH Professor Says Chocolate Can Cause Positive Reaction

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DURHAM, N.H. -- For those sweating over what to get their sweetheart for Valentine's Day, consider this: Research suggests there's something sensual about chocolate!

Belgian dark, milky smooth or rich fudge, a gift of chocolate has been a common romantic gesture for decades -- and with good reason, according to Suzanne Mitchell, University of New Hampshire assistant professor of psychology.

Mitchell, a behavior specialist whose research includes studying the effects of caffeine and nicotine, explains that chocolate is an "upper," or mood-enhancing stimulant because of its chemical properties.

"There are all sorts of positive chemical components of chocolate," she says. "It's the stimulants that make you feel alert, not tired, and chocolate has a lot of them." Theobromine (commonly found in tea) is the most prevalent "upper" found in chocolate.

Caffeine is also part of the mix, but not to the extent that it is contained in coffee or cola drinks. "You would have to consume a half-pound box of chocolate to equal the caffeine in even one ounce of coffee," she says. Depending on the individual, caffeine can also make a person jittery or nervous, so the smaller amount found in chocolate may be just enough for a romantic spark.

Other carbohydrates found in chocolate lead to increased serotonin, an organic compound associated with decreased levels of depression, tension and fatigue. Chemicals that increase serotonin are also found in Prozac, a drug used to treat clinical depression.

"Chocolate also contains phenylethylamine," Mitchell

adds. "Researchers believe this stimulant is also released when you interact with a loved one, no chocolate necessary."

But, Mitchell cautions, don't expect chocolate to be a cure for the lovelorn. All this good chemistry goes to waste without physical attraction and emotional attachment. "Eating chocolate with a loved -- now that's a bonus. Together they double the effect of making you feel good."

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