



## Knowledge and Attitude towards Label Claim and Health Benefits of Dark Chocolates among Customers of Oman—Cross-Sectional Survey

Nirmala Halligudi<sup>a\*</sup>, Mullaicharam Bhupathyraaj<sup>a</sup>, Saleem Desai<sup>b</sup>,  
Alaa Mohammed Bait Ateeq<sup>a</sup>, Saja Yaareb Abdullah<sup>a</sup>  
and Muna Salim Al Rahbi<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> College of Pharmacy, National University of Science and Technology, Muscat, Oman.  
<sup>b</sup> Department of Chemistry, Rani Channamma University Belagavi, Karnataka, India.

### **Authors' contributions**

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

### **Article Information**

DOI: 10.9734/AJACR/2021/v10i230230

#### Editor(s):

(1) Prof. Angélica Machi Lazzarin, State University of Maringá, Brazil.

#### Reviewers:

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Complete Peer review History, details of the editor(s), Reviewers and additional Reviewers are available here:  
<https://www.sdiarticle5.com/review-history/77066>

**Original Research Article**

**Received 05 October 2021**  
**Accepted 10 December 2021**  
**Published 13 December 2021**

### **ABSTRACT**

Dark chocolate is one of the most studied foods in the recent period due to its potential effects and health benefits. Admittedly, people's attitudes and acceptance of dark chocolate are still unknown. The cross-sectional study was aimed to determine the usage and effect of dark chocolate on health. It also aimed to study the attitude of young adults in Oman towards the consumption of dark chocolate and to discover the most preferred brands of DC in the Omani market. The study was conducted from spring 2020 to Fall 2021 in Oman. Two types of surveys were conducted. Firstly, a product survey was done to compare some brands according to the price, ingredient, expiry date, and country of origin. Secondly, across sectional-based survey was done focusing on the health benefits of consuming dark chocolate. Three hundred and forty-five (345) respondents participated in completing this survey. The results proved that many people are now aware of the health benefits of dark chocolate. The majority of the participants expressed their knowledge of the health aspect of dark chocolate and their interest in choosing the best product by examining the ingredients - especially the cocoa percentage- of the product before purchasing.

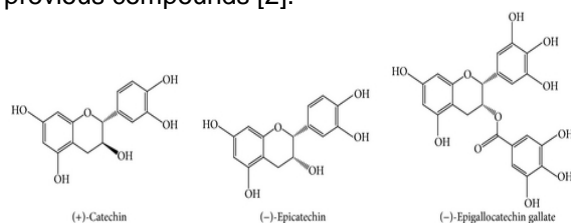
\*Corresponding author: Email: [nirmalahalligudi@nu.edu.om](mailto:nirmalahalligudi@nu.edu.om);

**Keywords:** Dark chocolate; health benefits; attitude; label claim; polyphenols.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The cardiovascular effect of flavonoids appears to be through elevating the bioavailability of nitric oxide thus it works on protecting vascular endothelium and reducing the risk factors of cardiovascular disease (CVD). Moreover, insulin resistance might be improved by flavonoids and related antioxidant action of polyphenol by increasing nitric oxide endothelial level and decreasing reactive oxygen formation. The *in vitro* studies suggest that polyphenols will act on the inhibition of I $\kappa$ B kinase and downregulate the nuclear factor- $\kappa$ B which is sensitive signals in redox transduction pathway that take a place in the endothelial injury cascade and are involved in insulin resistance induced by fat [1]. On the other hand, *in vivo* studies revealed that a flavonoid complex called silymarin provides a glycemic control along with reducing both fasting insulin and the requirement of exogenous insulin in type 2 diabetic patients receiving therapy.

DC is flavonoids' rich delight has high cocoa percentages ranging from 70% to 99%, which are responsible for its bittersweet taste. The main type of flavonoids present in dark chocolate is flavanol which is also found in tea. Flavonoids belong to the polyphenol family that mediates the effects of DC in cardiovascular disease (CVD). On the other hand, fresh cocoa bean has (-)-epicatechin as a major polyphenol compound within the range of 21–43 mg/g followed by the (+)-catechin, along with dimers and trimers of the previous compounds [2].



Dark chocolate (DC) was introduced into the human diet in South America at least 3,000 years ago and was brought to Europe by Christopher Columbus [3]. By the end of 16th century, the first cacao trees were brought to Spain and were referred as *Theobroma cacao* by Carl Linnaeus in 1753 [4,5]. Later, the chocolate reached Britain and appeared at distinguished chocolate houses then spread in the rest of Europe where many nations started their own plantations of cocoa [6]. During the past eras, dark chocolate was the only form available for chocolate in

ancient Mesoamerica which is Mexico nowadays.

Dark chocolate is also known as black chocolate or plain chocolate, which is made typically by the addition of fat and sugar to cocoa that is produced from the seeds of the tropical tree *Theobroma cacao* by combining the Greek terms “theo” (meaning God) and “broma” (meaning drink) [7,8]. Usually, no milk or less milk is used in this process.

The main aim of the study is to find out the knowledge and attitude towards label claim and health benefits of dark chocolates available in Oman.

## 2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### 2.1 Cross Sectional Study

The study was conducted from spring 2020 to Fall 2021 in Muscat, Oman, and the data was collected from 20 October 2020 to 15 November 2020. There are two types of surveys that were done, one was on products available in the Oman market as it was done to compare the different brands according to the price, ingredient, expiry date, and country of origin. All different brands of dark chocolates were purchased from three hypermarket in sultanate of Muscat. The other survey was community-based to check their knowledge about dark chocolate benefits. This survey is cross-sectional based and was done in Oman focusing on health benefits upon consuming dark chocolate, distributed online in a Google Form. The responses of the survey represented a different group of adults. There were 345 responses who participated in filling the survey. Google form questionnaire consisted of 21 questions in two languages English and Arabic included in four parts. The first part was on Demographic Data covering name, gender, age, nationality, and qualifications. The second part was knowledge-based. The third part was on attitude and the last one was practice-based. There were 10 participants who were excluded as they answered questions number 20 with NO then they answer question 21 which is only for people who marked “yes” as an answer. The data collected was then statistically analyzed through MS-Excel. This program was utilized in calculating the percentage from the obtained data and then representing the percentages in charts and tables.

## 2.2 Study Design

- **Duration:** April 2020 till December 2020.
- **Place:** Muscat, Oman.
- **Type:** Cross-Section survey.
- **Targeted population:** young Omani adults.
- **Data:** online Google form (questionnaire).

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Data Collection

The current research survey presented dark chocolate and health related quality of life in Muscat, Oman. After collecting the data, we started studying the numbers and analyzing them, where we divided the questions into four parts each part serves a common topic as mentioned previously. The first four questions were addressing the demographic characteristics of the respondents. Regarding the gender, we

predicted that females would consume more dark chocolate, and yet the results showed that 64% of the respondents were females. The next question was asking about the age group, 63.2% were between 15 to 25 years' old which basically proves that we targeted young adults by sending the survey via national university emails. Fewer participants were above the age of 45 (3.8% only) which reflects the fact that older people do not have the same level of internet access as younger adults. Moving to the participants Qualification level, 48.98% of them are having baccalaureate degree, 37.68% having diploma degree, 10.14% are undergraduate, 2.61% having master's degree and 0.58% having doctorate degree. The last demographic detail that was about the nationality of the respondent, out of the 345 respondents, 284 were Omani while 61 were non-Omani living in Oman.

Table 1 demographic details.

**Table 1. Results obtained for Demographic details**

Demographic characteristic	Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	123	36%
	Female	222	64%
<b>Age group</b>	15-25	218	63.2%
	25-35	83	24.1%
	35-45	31	8.99%
	45 and over	13	3.8%
<b>Nationality</b>	Omani	284	82.32%
	Non- Omani	61	17.68%
<b>Educational level</b>	Undergraduate	35	10.14%
	Diploma	130	37.68%
	Baccalaureate	169	48.98%
	Master	9	2.61%
	Doctorate	2	0.58%

**Table 2. Knowledge based questions**

Knowledge-Based Questions	Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
What type of chocolate do you consider as a healthy snack?	White chocolate	15	4%
	Dark chocolate	204	60%
	Milk chocolate	124	36%
Do you know the contents of the dark chocolate?	Yes	162	46.96%
	No	179	51.88%
What is the major ingredient of dark chocolate?	Cocoa (cacao)	322	93.33%
	Fat	7	2.03%
	Sugar	14	4.06%
Do you know effect of the ingredients on health?	Yes	162	48%
	No	175	52%
Do you think the presence of metals (Cadmium and lead) in dark chocolate is harmful to your body?	Yes	153	44.35%
	No	190	55.1%
Which of the following effects does dark chocolate have?	Cardiovascular effect	104	30.14%
	Blood sugar reduction	50	14.49%
	Reducing menstrual pain	31	8.99%
	All of above	174	50.43%

### 3.2 Knowledge Based Study

The second section of the survey measured and assessed the amount of respondents' knowledge of dark chocolate ingredients and its effect on health. The study showed that most of the people living in Oman (60%) are considering dark chocolate as a healthy snack, less participants (4.35%) considering white chocolate as a healthy snack, but most of them (51.88%) don't know the contents of the dark chocolate. 93.33% of the respondents know that cocoa is the major ingredient of dark chocolate and less participants (2.03%) think that fat is the major ingredient of dark chocolate. Approximately half of the respondents (50.72%) don't know the effect of the dark chocolate ingredients on health. 50.34% of the respondents believe that dark chocolate has cardiovascular effect, reducing blood sugar and reducing menstrual pain and less participants (8.99%) think it has effect on reducing menstrual pain only. The report showed that more than half (55.1%) of the respondents don't believe the presence of metals (Cadmium and lead) in dark chocolate is harmful to the body.

### 3.3 Attitude Based Study

Moving to the third part of our survey that measured and assessed of the respondents' attitudes and preferences regarding of dark chocolate. The study clearly showed that respondents looking for ingredients before buying as more than half (60%) of the respondents say it is important to know the ingredients of dark chocolate before buying it. Sugar (41.45%) is the highest ingredient that respondents looking for while 32.75% of the respondents are looking for the cocoa percentage and less are looking for other ingredients (cholesterol/fat, sodium, protein, and others). Only 26.96% of the respondents are looking for all ingredients mentioned above. Moving on to the aspects that respondents look for while buying dark chocolate which are expiry date, brand, packaging, country of origin, and price.

36.23% of our respondents are looking for all aspects mentioned above while 35.65%, 32.46%, and 29.86% are looking for expiry date, price, and brand respectively. Few respondents looking for packaging (11.3%) and country of origin (21.16%). Next questions we discussed the additives to dark chocolate which are antioxidants, preservatives, flavor enhancers,

sweeteners, coloring agents, and others. The results that we got is that more than half (70%) of the respondents know it is necessary to check the type of additives in dark chocolate. 15%, 14%, 14%, 13%, 8%, and 14% check for anti-oxidant, preservatives, flavor enhancer, sweetener, coloring agents, and other additives respectively. In addition, 22% of the respondents cannot differentiate between the additives. The last question we discussed in this part is the decoration that respondents like on the chocolate which is icing, sprinkles, and chocolate sauce. 47.54% of the respondents don't prefer any decoration in their chocolate while 29.57%, 15.1%, and 6.7% prefer chocolate sauce, icing and sprinkles respectively.

### 3.4 Practice Based Study

In the last part of our study, we measured and assessed the respondents' practice routine and preference in purchasing dark chocolate. We found only 9% of the respondents who buy dark chocolate always and 35% rarely buy it. More than half (69.28 %) of the respondents consume dark chocolate once in a week. We discussed the different reasons for eating dark chocolate. People could be eating dark chocolate when they are in happy or sad, stressed, in bad mood, having PMT, and hungry. The results which we got is that 68.12% more than half of the respondents eat dark chocolate for no specific reason and 10.14%, 9.57%, 8.99%, 8.12%, 6.38%, and 5.51% eat dark chocolate when they are hungry, in a bad mood, in a happy mood, sad, have PMT and stressed respectively. Also, we found 51% of the respondents who consumption of chocolate remain the same around the period time, 39% double consumption of chocolate, and less percentage 10% triple consumption of chocolate. Moreover, 71.88 % of the respondents recommend the consumption of dark chocolate to their friends and family by advising them that dark chocolate is good for stress suppression, for losing weight when you are on a diet, to enhancing memory (brain function), and have healthy skin. The most brands found to be consumed is Galaxy 49.28% because it is the cheapest among the other brands and the least brand found to be consumed is Godiva 4.64% which is the most expensive one. In the last part in this section of our study we discussed flavor preference, we found that approximately half (51.6%) of the respondents do not prefer dark chocolate with flavors and 48.41% prefer dark chocolate with flavors. The most favorite flavor is the nuts which

correspond to 60% of the respondents and the least favorite flavor is chili pepper which corresponds to 3%.

We found that many consume dark chocolate to reduce menstrual pain also many who double and triple that consumption of dark chocolate and that proves what we found in the article (Dark chocolate's effect on menstrual pain in late adolescents) [9] which is done on 2017 Dec 28 by Maharani, Pramono and Wahyuni in this study they show that dark chocolate has a significant effect in reducing menstrual pain in the late adolescents. We found 28.41% of our participants consume dark chocolate to suppress stress, 9.28% for skin benefits, 26.67% for enhancing the memory (brain function), and 16.23% for losing weight that proves what we found in the literatures (Dark chocolate: Consumption for pleasure or therapy? [10] which is done on 2009 Nov by Lippi, Franchini, Montagnana, Favaloro, Guidi and Targher,

Health benefits of dark chocolate [11] which is done on 2014 by Haritha, Kalyani and Rao, Effect of the dark chocolate consumption on some markers of oxidative stress, endothelial dysfunction and inflammation of a healthy population [12] which is done on 2017 by Lares and Pérez. Which are talking about dark chocolate effects on health but majority of our study 39.71% consume dark chocolate for pleasure and they don't know about the benefits. Also we found that label information has a huge impact on the consumers as 36.23% of our study they look for all aspect of label information while buying dark so different packaging labels affect consumers purchase intention of dark chocolate, the results is the same to the study influence of label information on dark chocolate acceptability [12]. Which is done on 2012 Apr by Torres-Moreno, Tarrega, Torrecasana and Blanch as they found that various brands of dark chocolate have an influence on consumers' expectations.

**Table 3. Results obtained for attitude based questions**

Attitude Based Questions	Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
Is it important to know the ingredients before buying dark chocolate?	Yes	203	60%
	No	138	40%
What is the ingredient that you look for before buying?	Cocoa percentage	113	32.75%
	Cholesterol/fat	79	22.98%
	Sodium	14	4.06%
	Protein	44	12.75%
	Sugar	143	41.45%
	All of above	93	26.96%
	Any other	10	2.89%
Which aspect do you look for while buying dark chocolate?	Expiry date	123	35.65%
	Brand	103	29.86%
	Packaging	39	11.3%
	Country of origin	73	21.16%
	Price	112	32.46%
	All of above	125	36.23%
Is it necessary to check the type of additives in dark chocolate?	Yes	237	70%
	No	103	30%
In your opinion, which of the following additives are ok to be present in dark chocolate?	Antioxidant	67	15%
	Preservatives	63	14%
	Flavor enhancer	64	14%
	Sweetener	61	13%
	Coloring agents	38	8%
	None of them	67	14%
	I cannot differentiate	104	22%
What decoration would you like on your chocolate?	Icing	52	15.07%
	Sprinkles	23	6.67%
	Chocolate sauce	102	29.57%
	None	164	47.54%

**Table 4. Results obtained for Practice Based questions**

Practice Based Questions	Options	Number of respondents	Percentage
How frequently do you buy dark chocolate?	Always	30	9%
	Often	59	17%
	Sometimes	134	39%
	Rarely	119	35%
How many times in a week do you consume dark chocolate?	Once	239	69.28%
	Twice	46	13.33%
	Three times	23	6.67%
	More	22	6.38%
What are/is the reason/s for eating dark chocolate? I eat dark chocolate	When you are happy	31	8.99%
	When you are sad	28	8.12%
	When you are stressed	19	5.51%
	When you are in a bad mood	33	9.57%
	When you have PMT	22	6.38%
	When you are hungry	35	10.14%
	No specific reason	235	68.12%
Do you double your chocolate consumption around your period time?	Yes	98	39%
	I triple it	26	10%
	No	127	51%
Do you recommend the consumption of dark chocolate to your friends and family?	Yes	248	71.89%
	No	86	24.93%
What is the advice you give to others while recommending eating dark chocolate? It is good for	Stress suppression	98	28.41%
	Losing weight	56	16.23%
	Enhancing the memory (brain function)	92	26.67%
	Skin	32	9.28%
	Others	137	39.71%
	Lindt	26	7.54%
Which of the following brands do you consume the most?	Hersheys	43	12.46%
	Galaxy	170	49.28%
	Godiva	16	4.64%
	Others	81	23.48%
	Yes	167	48.41%
Do you prefer dark chocolate with flavors? If yes, which flavor do you prefer the most?	No	178	51.59%
	Mint	11	6%
	Chili pepper	5	3%
	Orange	13	8%
	Nuts	100	60%
	Others	38	23%

### 3.5 Product Survey








Table 5 represents the various brands that have a separate line for dark chocolate production. This table is a brief description on each brand regarding its ingredient, price, country of origin, production and expiry dates. Each brand of these offers a variety of dark chocolate in term of cocoa solid percentage such as Lindt which provides 65%, 70%, 85%, 90% and 95% of cocoa to the consumers along with variety in flavors such as mint, orange, chili, among others.

As mentioned above, many participants expressed their knowledge of the health aspect of dark chocolate and their interest in choosing the best product by examining the ingredients - especially the cocoa percentage of the product

before purchasing. According to the participants' responds mentioned previously, Galaxy is the brand most preferred and consumed (49.28%) in the Omani market. Admittedly, people tend to buy dark chocolate, which has lower levels of fat and sugar. This indicates the high level of people's acceptance of dark chocolate despite its bitter taste.

Table 5 gives a description of the ingredients of dark chocolate for each brand mentioned. It is worth noting that despite the fact that the Galaxy brand is the most consumed, it contains only 35-79% cocoa. It is noted that Lindt and Whitaker's brands have the highest cocoa solids content compared to the other mentioned brands, as they contain 99 % and 92 % cocoa respectively. Guylian brand then comes after these two brands, as it contains 84% cocoa solids.

**Table 5. Product Survey of different brands of dark chocolates**

Product survey of main dark chocolate brands available in Oman					
Brand name	Image	Country of origin	Ingredients	Price	Production and Expiry dates
Godiva		Belgium	Cocoa mass, sugar, cocoa butter, cocoa powder, emulsifier (soy lecithin), salt, butter oil (milk), cocoa solids 72%.	1.210 OMR	PD:29/4/2021 ED:29/10/2022
Lindt		Switzerland	Cocoa mass, fat reduced cocoa, cocoa butter, demerara sugar, cocoa solids 99%.	1.130 OMR	PD:22/1/2021 ED:23/4/2022
Galaxy		China	Cocoa mass, sugar, milk fat, cocoa butter, non hydrogenated vegetable fat (less than 5 % of palm oil), emulsifier (soy lecithin E 322), natural flavoring ( vanillas, citrus), artificial flavor ( methyl vanillin), cocoa solid 35% minimum.	0.280 OMR	PD:04/03/2021 ED:02/03/2022
Guylian		Belgium	Cocoa mass, dietary fiber (dextrin, inulin, oligofructose), cocoa butter, sweetener (erythritol), fat reduced cocoa powder, emulsifier (sunflower lecithin), cocoa solids 84%.	1.313 OMR	PD:22/4/2021 ED:20/10/2022
Schogetten		Germany	Cocoa mass, cocoa butter, cocoa powder, emulsifier (lecithin), butter oil (milk), cocoa solids 60%.	0.473 OMR	PD:17/2/2021 ED:30/9/2022
Whittaker's		New Zealand	Cocoa mass, pure cocoa butter, sugar, emulsifier (soy lecithin), natural vanilla flavor, cocoa solids 92%.	1.460 OMR	PD:20/8/2020 ED:20/12/2021
Mackie's		Scotland	Cocoa mass, cocoa butter, cocoa powder, emulsifier (lecithin), mint flavor, cocoa solids 60%.	0.930 OMR	ED:30/9/2021

It should be added that although people tend to consume chocolate that contains a lower level of sugar, it should be noted that dark chocolate contains the lowest sugar content compared to other types of chocolate. Here in Table 5, due to the lack of specific percentages of sugar levels in these brands, the comparison is difficult from this direction, but it should be noted that the darker the chocolate is in color, the lower the amount of sugar it contains.

Table 5 also states that the majority of the mentioned brands contain emulsifiers, as it prevents cocoa and cocoa butter from separating and helps to blend the flavors. In Table 5, it is found that lecithin, which is from a natural source, is the most widely used emulsifier and stabilizer. It was also stated that many brand of dark chocolate contain flavors such as mint flavor, natural vanilla flavor, and citrus. In addition, it is important to state that some dark chocolate brands contain some additives. Here in Table 5, Guylian brand contains erythritol which is an artificial sweetener, antioxidant, and excipient and flavoring agent.

Dark chocolate is famous for its bittersweet taste and for being a rich source of several minerals and antioxidants. In the early days, chocolate was subjected to a lot of criticism for containing a

large amount of fat and it is worth noting that consuming chocolate was not considered a remedy at that time, but rather it was considered a sin. Its consumption was associated with several cases of caries, acne, hypertension, diabetes and obesity. However, the discovery of the biological content of dark chocolate has changed this perception and has encouraged many researches related to the potential health benefits of dark chocolate.

The questionnaire, in which 345 people participated, proved that many people are now aware of the health benefits of dark chocolate. Many participants expressed their knowledge of the health aspect of dark chocolate and their interest in choosing the best product by examining the ingredients especially the cocoa percentage of the product before purchasing. However, the participants didn't specify which brand of DC they choose, but it is clear that Galaxy is the brand most preferred in the market.

People tend to buy a dark chocolate containing low levels of fat and sugar. This indicates the high level of people acceptance of the plain dark chocolate, despite it being bitter in taste. Admittedly, it should also be noted that a group of people is still not aware of the health effects of the dark chocolate, which shows the need to

spread more awareness related to the benefits of consuming dark chocolate, as they are facts that have been scientifically proven.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Dark chocolate is famous for its bittersweet taste and for being a rich source of several minerals and antioxidants. In the early days, chocolate was subjected to a lot of criticism for containing a large amount of fat and it is worth noting that consuming chocolate was not considered a remedy at that time, but rather it was considered a sin. Its consumption was associated with several cases of caries, acne, hypertension, diabetes and obesity. However, the discovery of the biological content of dark chocolate has changed this perception and has encouraged many researches related to the potential health benefits of dark chocolate.

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#### DISCLAIMER

The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly use products in our area of research and country. There is absolutely no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for any litigation but for the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company rather it was funded by personal efforts of the authors.

#### CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, Participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the authors.

#### ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research work was approved by the Research and Ethics committee (Reference No-Phar 425-CoP-33) of college of Pharmacy, National University of Science and Technology, Muscat, Oman.

#### COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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