

# Theobroma cacao

## Cacao Tree



Chocolate comes from *Theobroma cacao*, the scientific name for the cacao tree. A small tree native to the Amazon Basin, the cacao tree grows throughout the tropics, mostly in Africa.

The fleshy fruit of the cacao tree contains brown seeds called cacao. Fermenting and roasting cacao is the first step in making chocolate. People mash the seeds into a paste called chocolate liqueur which they then treat with heat to create cocoa. Cocoa is the key ingredient in most chocolate products.

Cold-pressing unroasted cacao makes raw cacao, which has gained a reputation as a “superfood” due to its high amount of **antioxidants**, minerals, and vitamins. Raw cacao on its own tastes very bitter, so it is often made into a powder that can be added to other foods.

### *Health Benefits*

Raw cacao is full of antioxidants called flavanols. Eating foods rich in flavanols has a variety of health benefits for your body, including the following:

#### **Heart Protection**

Many scientific studies show that flavanol-rich foods might help lower your blood pressure and improve the way your blood vessels' walls function, lowering your risk of **heart disease**.

### *Improved Digestive Health*

Cacao contains fiber that bacteria eat to create fatty acid chains. These fatty acids benefit your **digestive system**. Drinks made with cacao might also increase the number of good bacteria in your gut.

### **Less Stress**

Research shows that eating dark chocolate can reduce **stress**, which boosts your overall mental and physical health.



### **Improved Cognitive Function**

**A specific flavanol in cacao called epicatechin may help with some parts of brain health, including cognition, blood flow, and risk of dementia.**

### **Lower Risk of Diabetes**

**Studies show that eating cacao may lower your risk of type 2 diabetes.**

### **Nutrients**

The chocolate-making process removes a lot of the antioxidants in raw cacao (almost 60%). However, if you'd still prefer to eat raw cacao in the form of chocolate, you can still get many of the nutrients by eating very dark chocolate (60% to 70% cacao).

Raw cacao is a good source of:

- **Magnesium**
- **Iron**

- Calcium
- **Potassium**
- Phosphorous

### Things to Watch Out For

Eating too much cacao during pregnancy or breastfeeding may be harmful. For dogs and cats, a compound found in cacao called theobromine is very toxic.



### How to Prepare Cacao

Using raw cacao powder is probably the easiest way to add raw cacao to your diet. Here are a few ways to start enjoying the health benefits of cacao:

- Combine avocado, raw cacao powder, coconut oil, and honey in a blender to create a creamy avocado chocolate mousse.
- Add cacao powder, natural peanut butter, and maple syrup to plain Greek yogurt for a tasty treat.
- Combine raw cacao powder, eggs, brown sugar, almond meal, and butter to make a flourless cacao fudge cake.
- Crumble walnuts in a food processor then add dates and raw cacao to create three-ingredient energy balls.
- Add raw cacao powder, maca powder, turmeric, cinnamon, honey, and coconut oil to boiled milk for a healthier hot chocolate drink.
- Blend raw cocoa powder, water, almond butter, cinnamon, and ice for a delightful banana cacao smoothie.
- Sprinkle cacao powder over a bowl of fresh fruit — pineapples, raspberries, and bananas all make great pairings with cacao.
- Bake a healthy chocolate bread with raw cacao powder, spelt flour, eggs, coconut milk, raw honey, and pistachios.



