

Can the men from Mars save our civilisation?

At this time of year, one of the gifts most frequently given, most warmly received and most commonly consumed is chocolate.

Our love affair with chocolate dates back over 1,000 years with cocoa residues having been found in relics from the Mayan civilisation of Central America.

And it seems throughout its history chocolate has been taken as much for medicinal purposes as for taste. Even so, with regard to nutritional value, chocolate is a double-edged sword – high in fat and sugar, but rich in antioxidants.

Dark chocolate is considered to have the better health credentials because of its high content of raw cocoa.

But, according to an article in *New Scientist* magazine (20-27 December 2008), there is a looming dark side to chocolate production. The bad news for chocoholics is that without some intervention, the supply of chocolate could start to run low.

Chocolate is made from the fermented, roasted seeds of the *Theobroma cacao* (cocoa) tree. Africa grows 70% of cacao – mostly in Ivory Coast and Ghana – but disease, deforestation and drought destroy a third of the world's cacao crop every year.

Nevertheless, there is some good news. The men from Mars could save the day. Scientists from the biggest chocolate company in the world, Mars Inc, have initiated a study, the results of which could lead to disease resistant trees and increased cacao yields.

So, it's no time to stop eating chocolate. In fact, the *New Scientist* article suggests that an extra reason to enjoy eating chocolate is that the "active ingredients" are almost certainly grown on small farms in poor countries. "When you buy chocolate, you help poor farmers feed their families."

Meanwhile back in Australia, the land of comparative plenty, there are still probably some pangs of guilt associated with eating (at least) large quantities of chocolate. And understandably so; 50% of our population is overweight or obese.

Of course, we can't just blame chocolate. During the festive season, general over indulgence in food and drink seems almost normal and accepted behaviour.

The season to be jolly can have some jolly unwanted consequences.

Perhaps our New Year's resolutions, from February onwards, can include more moderation with our eating and drinking and more exercise as well. For the more immediate problems of heartburn and indigestion, your pharmacist can now provide you with some even more effective relief and also some good advice on preventing the hangover effects of too much of a good thing.

And maybe it's worth trying one more piece of chocolate, just to help the world's economy.

Happy Christmas.