Eating chocolate may benefit heart

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Eating chocolate on a regular basis may be associated to a lower risk of heart disease, according to a new study published online by Heart on Tuesday. Researchers have discovered a link between moderate chocolate intake and a lowered risk for atrial fibrillation or flutter (AF), the irregular heartbeat that can lead to stroke, heart failure and other serious problems.

Using food-frequency questionnaires to determine chocolate consumption, scientists collected diet and health data from 55,502 men and women ages 50 to 64 in Denmark. About 3,346 cases of atrial fibrillation occurred in this follow-up study lasting over 13 years.

Participants who ate one to three 1-ounce (28.35 grams) servings a month had a 10 percent lower rate of AF than those who hardly did. Those who ate one serving a week had a 17 percent lower rate; and those who ate two to six servings a week had a 20 percent lower rate, researchers found.

Interestingly, the study also shows that "participants with higher levels of chocolate intake were more likely to report a higher level of educational attainment."

However, the team noted that the study was "observational" and cannot prove that chocolate prevents AF.

Many studies have suggested other potential benefits from chocolate. A 2011 Swedish study, for example, found that women who ate more than 45 grams of chocolate a week had a 20 percent lower risk of stroke than women who treated themselves to fewer than 9 grams of the sweet stuff.

Other claims include that chocolate can lower blood pressure, lower "bad" LDL cholesterol and lower risk of heart disease. It's also a mood booster. One of the reasons dark chocolate has been deemed especially heart-healthy is its inflammation-fighting properties, which reduce cardiovascular risk.

A small Italian study from 2005 found that regularly eating chocolate increases insulin sensitivity, thereby reducing risk for diabetes, but many experts see caveats here. Even the bittersweet varieties of chocolate can be high in calories, fat and sugar－not assets if you have diabetes or many other health issues.