Eating chocolate could lower risk of potentially dangerous irregular heartbeat

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CHOCOLATE may have a bad reputation for being packed with calories, but new research has found it may be good for the heart.

A study published in the journal Heart found that regularly eating chocolate is associated with a lower risk of heart flutter.

Also known as atrial fibrillation, it causes an [irregular heart rhythm](http://www.express.co.uk/life-style/health/806308/stroke-symptoms-irregular-heartbeat).

While it is usually harmless - causing occasional dizziness or shortness of breath - it can turn more concerning, causing an increased risk of [stroke](http://www.express.co.uk/life-style/health/650552/stroke-atrial-fibrillation-high-blood-pressure-at-risk-jenny-eclair-health-scare-loose-wom) and other heart-related problems.

There are currently 33 million people globally with atrial fibrillation, and one in four adults will suffer at some point during their lifetime.

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Men who ate between two and six servings per week had the most protection from the condition, while women needed just one weekly serving.

The researchers found that the atrial fibrillation diagnosis rate was ten per cent lower in those who consumed one to three servings per month, than others who consumed it less than once a month.

But crucially, they discovered it was 17 per cent lower for one weekly serving, 20 per cent lower for two to six weekly servings and 14 per cent lower for one or more daily servings.

It’s unclear what causes the condition in the first place, and there is currently no cure.

Researchers wanted to see whether chocolate consumption could help reduce rates given that previous studies had found a link between it - particularly dark chocolate varieties - and heart health.

However, in this study participants were not asked to specify which type they ate.

The study authors acknowledged that chocolate is often consumed in high calorie products containing lots of fat and sugar, which are generally not considered beneficial to heart health.

They explained that: “Despite the fact that most of the chocolate consumed in our sample probably contained relatively low concentrations of the potentially protective ingredients, we still observed a robust statistically significant association.”

However, those consuming more chocolate tended to be more highly educated and healthier in other ways - two factors linked to better overall health.

Other experts suggest that this might have influenced the findings.

They also point out that cocoa solid levels vary in different parts of the world.

However, Dr Sea Pokorney and Dr Jonathan Piccini from the Duke Center for Atrial Fibrillation in North Carolina, added: “Regardless of the limitations of the Danish chocolate study, the findings are interesting and warrant further consideration, especially given the importance of identifying effective prevention strategies.”