**Health warning: a little chocolate is actually good for us**

[](http://cdn.newsapi.com.au/image/v1/924240c7235eadbb650f45e2bc11b799?width=1024)Miga Aboulian from Lixie Chocolaterie in Sydney’s inner-city Surry Hills, with some taste treats to tempt even the most spartan of health-conscious consumers. Picture: John Feder

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It is the world’s guiltiest pleasure — a delight to the tastebuds but a devil to the waistline. Now chocolate’s health cred has been given a big boost, with evidence that it can steady an irregular heartbeat.

A study has found people who eat chocolate are less likely to suffer from atrial fibrillation, or ­abnormal heart rhythm. An incurable condition that distorts the heart’s electrical system, it can cause palpitations, chest pains and dizziness and help trigger strokes, heart attacks and dementia.

The research crunched health and diet data from more than 55,000 Danish people in their 50s and 60s, in a study lasting 16 years. It found that people with modest chocolate habits were up to 23 per cent less likely to have been diagnosed with AF than those who rarely or never ­imbibed.

The study found people who ate moderate servings of chocolate — 30g, equivalent to about six squares — appeared to be most protected. The optimal doses were one serving a week for women, and between two and six for men.

While the team stressed that the study was “observational”, and could not prove cause and effect, its results came on the back of ­“extensive research” associating chocolate with lower rates of heart complications. “(It) adds to the ­accumulating evidence on the health benefits of moderate chocolate intake,” said lead researcher Elizabeth Mostofsky, an epidemiologist with Harvard University’s TH Chan School of Public Health.

Chocolate’s health benefits are thought to derive from “flavo­nols”, colourless chemicals found in cocoa as well as fruit, vegetables, tea and red wine. Peter Kistler, an AF expert with the Baker Heart and Diabetes Institute in Melbourne, said they appeared to help open up the blood vessels around the heart.

Chocolate had never previously been found to affect AF rates, with smaller studies in 2010 and 2015 yielding negative results. The new findings suggest that flavonols’ anti-inflammatory prop­erties could help prevent electrical disturbances of the heart.

Professor Kistler stressed that people should not binge on chocolate, given its high fat, sugar and calorie content. “We’re talking about small amounts of chocolate — obesity remains our big challenge in Australia.”

Sydney chocolatier Miga Aboulian has observed a trend away from “bulk serve confectionary”, with people preferring to ­savour small quantities of “really good chocolate”.

Ms Aboulian, who runs Lixie Chocolaterie in Sydney’s inner-city Surry Hills, said people were vaguely aware of chocolate’s health benefits despite the “bad rap” it got from sugar. “A lot of people are opting now to have high cocoa content dark chocolate,” she said.

Dr Mostofsky said the team’s findings were surprising, but “we still observed a significant association between eating chocolate and a lower risk of AF, suggesting that even small amounts of cocoa consumption can have a positive health impact”.