**Chocolate ‘good for the heart’**

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It is the treat of choice for romantics hoping to win someone’s heart. Now scientists have found that chocolate helps the heart beat steadily, in more ways than one.

A Harvard University-led study suggests that chocolate can help prevent heart flutter, or atrial fibrillation, a cardiovascular scourge thought to affect more than 33 million people. Characterised by a rapid and irregular heartbeat, it increases the risk of heart attack and stroke and can impair cognitive performance and quality of life — and there is no cure.

But now the Boston-led team has hit on a potential prevention, after it analysed the diet and health of more than 55,000 Danes in a study lasting over 13 years.

The research, outlined this morning in the journal *Heart*, found that people with modest chocolate habits were one-fifth less likely to be diagnosed with AF.

“Our study adds to the accumulating evidence on the health benefits of moderate chocolate intake,” said lead author Elizabeth Mostofsky, an epidemiologist with the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health.

The study was “observational” and does not prove that chocolate actively prevents heart flutter, the team stressed

However, previous research has suggested that cocoa-containing foods — particularly dark chocolate, which has a higher cocoa content than milk chocolate — confer cardiovascular benefits.

Scientists credit cocoa’s high content of flavonols, which are thought to promote healthy blood vessel function. Flavonols are a class of flavonoids, plant-based chemicals thought to confer some of the health benefits from red wine and the so-called Mediterranean diet.

The study found that one 30g serving of chocolate a week for women — and between two and six for men — appeared to confer optimal heart benefits.

Participants who ate one to three servings a month had a 10 per cent lower rate of AF than those who imbibed less than once a month. Those who ate one serving a week had a 17 per cent lower rate; and those who ate two to six servings a week had a 20 per cent lower rate.

Commenting on the study, North Carolina AF experts Sean Pokorney and Jonathan Piccini said chocolate-based heart health messages would “resonate well” with the public. “Patients might be more than happy to comply with this healthcare advice,” they mused.

But Dr Mostofsky poured a bit of cold water on the party, warning people not to overdo it. “Many chocolate products are high in calories from sugar and fat and could lead to weight gain and other metabolic problems.”