
Heartening news for chocoholics

As a blood thinner, it's great -- but then there's the fat, sugar

- Jia-Rui Chong, Los Angeles Times
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This should get your blood flowing.

Researchers from Johns Hopkins University have found that chocolate thins blood and protects the heart in the same way as aspirin. The key is a compound in chocolate called flavanol, which slows down platelet clumping that can block off blood vessels and lead to a heart attack or stroke.

You have to eat at least a couple of tablespoons of dark chocolate a day to see some benefit -- and it's still not as effective as a single baby aspirin, which is usually prescribed to heart patients.

Matching aspirin would require eating several bars of chocolate a day, which could lead to other problems, such as obesity and diabetes -- to say nothing of tooth decay.

"I would never tell people to go ahead and eat chocolate because chocolate travels with a lot of friends, like fat and sugar," said epidemiologist Diane Becker, who led the study funded by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

Becker's discovery, presented at a meeting of the American Heart Association in Chicago on Tuesday, came about because chocoholics just couldn't stay away from their addiction.

Her study of 1,535 people was intended to look at how aspirin affected blood platelets.

Subjects were specifically instructed to stay away from chocolate, tea, strawberries and red wine.

But 139 people confessed to snacking on chocolate-chip cookies and other products. One subject admitted eating a gallon of chocolate ice cream.

Becker analyzed the cheaters' urine and found less thromboxane, a compound that indicates blood clotting. Blood analysis also showed slower clotting.

"It's a modest effect," said Dr. Karol Watson, a cardiologist at the UCLA who was not connected to the study. "But it's nice to say, 'You can't have that steak, but you can have chocolate afterward.' "

Becker's team next wants to study the effects of eating chocolate on a "free-living" population of volunteers. They will measure how much chocolate people eat and then watch them for several years to see if chocolate-eaters have a different rate of heart attacks, stroke and heart operations.

Other studies have suggested that dark chocolate contains more of the beneficial compounds linked with heart health, and experts note that the high sugar and fat content of most chocolate candy might cancel out some of the benefits.

Reuters contributed to this report.