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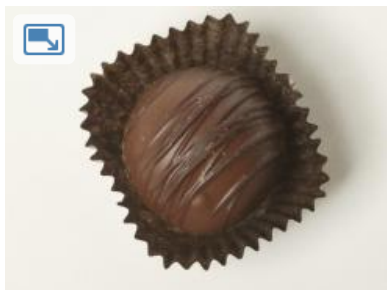
Chocolate may cut women's stroke risk, study says

By Serena Gordon, HealthDay

Updated 18h 52m ago

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In the latest research to tout the cardiovascular benefits of an already beloved food, Swedish scientists report that eating chocolate seems to lower a woman's risk of stroke.



Leslie Smith, Jr., USA TODAY

Chocolate should preferably be consumed as dark chocolate, as it contains more of the beneficial flavonoids, as well as less sugar.

The study found that women who had the highest consumption of chocolate -- about two candy bars a week -- had a 20 percent reduced risk of stroke.

"Cocoa contains flavonoids, which have antioxidant properties and can suppress oxidation of low-density lipoprotein ['bad' cholesterol] which can cause cardiovascular disease [including stroke]," explained study author Susanna Larsson, an associate professor in the division of nutritional epidemiology at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm.

Chocolate's benefits don't end there, Larsson said, adding that dark chocolate consumption has also been found to reduce blood pressure, lower insulin resistance and help keep your blood from forming dangerous clots.

But, that doesn't necessarily mean you should start adding chocolate to your daily menu.

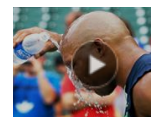
"It's important to keep findings like these in context. These findings don't mean that people need to exchange chocolate for broccoli in their diet," said Dr. Nieca Goldberg, a cardiologist and medical director of the Joan H. Tisch Center for Women's Health at NYU Langone Medical Center in New York City.

"Chocolate does have antioxidants, and antioxidants are beneficial for your health. They can help make your arteries more flexible and they can help you resist the oxidation of cholesterol. But, what if they had tried this study with apple skins or grapes?" she said.

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While the study found an association between chocolate and reduced stroke risk, it did not prove a cause-and-effect.

The findings are published as research correspondence in the Oct. 18 issue of the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*.

The study included more than 33,000 Swedish women between the ages of 49 and 83. None of the women had any history of stroke, heart disease, cancer or diabetes when the study began in 1997.

All of the women were asked to complete a questionnaire that included questions on more than 350 diet and lifestyle factors.

In the 1990s, Larsson wrote, 90 percent of the chocolate consumed in Sweden was milk chocolate that contained about 30 percent cocoa solids. This is a higher concentration of cocoa than is found in most dark chocolate products in the [United States](#).

Larsson reviewed information from the Swedish Hospital Discharge Registry between 1998 and 2008 to document any cases of stroke among the women in her study.

Overall, 1,549 of the women in the study had a stroke. Most -- 1,200 -- were ischemic strokes. That means that a blood vessel in the brain is blocked, starving an area of the brain of blood and oxygen. Another 224 strokes were hemorrhagic strokes, which means an area of the brain is bleeding into the rest of the brain. The remaining 125 strokes were recorded as an unspecified type.

"We observed that women with the highest consumption of chocolate [an average of about 2.3 ounces per week] had a significant 20 percent lower risk [of stroke] than those who never or rarely consumed chocolate," said Larsson.

She added that although this study was done in women, she expects the results would be similar in men. And, she noted that although U.S. chocolate generally contains less cocoa than chocolate consumed in Europe, there should be a benefit from chocolate consumption in this country, too.

But, she suggested, "chocolate should preferably be consumed as dark chocolate, as it contains more of the beneficial flavonoids, as well as less sugar."

"There's an upside and a downside to everything. I don't think people should eat all the chocolate they can, but some chocolate in moderation can have some benefit," said Goldberg. She added that it's important to remember that chocolate has a lot of sugar and fat, and it also contains caffeine. So, if you're prone to irregular heartbeats or high blood pressure, eating chocolate may affect those conditions.

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