

Chocolate works like aspirin to reduce heart attacks: study

A few bits of dark chocolate a day can have the same benefit as aspirin in reducing blood clots and preventing heart attacks, researchers said Tuesday in a study of chocolate lovers.

"What these chocolate 'offenders' taught us is that the chemical in cocoa beans has a biochemical effect similar to aspirin in reducing platelet clumping which can be fatal if a clot forms and blocks a blood vessel, causing a heart attack," lead researcher Diane Becker told the annual conference of the American Heart Association, in Chicago.

The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine professor cautioned that her work is not intended as a prescription to gobble up huge amounts of chocolate candy laced with health offending substances like sugar, butter and cream.

However, she said that two tablespoons a day of dark chocolate,

meaning the purest form of the candy made from dried extract of roasted cocoa beans, may be just what the doctor ordered.

For almost 20 years, scientists have known that dark chocolate, rich in chemicals called flavonoids, lowers blood pressure and has other beneficial effects on blood flow.

Becker's findings show that normal, everyday doses of chocolate found in ordinary foods is enough to provide clot-controlling benefit, rather than the kilos (several pounds) of chocolate earlier studies said were needed for flavonoids to have a significant effect.

"Eating a little bit of chocolate or

having a drink of hot cocoa as part of a regular diet is probably good for personal health, so long as people don't eat too much of it, and too much of the kind with lots of butter and sugar," said Becker.

The study is based on tests conducted on 139 subjects who were disqualified from an earlier, larger study on the effects of aspirin on blood platelets because they did not refrain from eating chocolate.

Their "offense," researchers said, led to what is believed to be the first biochemical explanation of why people who eat a few pieces of chocolate a day lower their risk of dying of a heart attack by almost one half.