

Love, chocolate good for the heart, cardiologist says

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(Medical Xpress) -- Being involved in a healthy, loving relationship is good for the heart, says Vanderbilt Heart and Vascular Institute cardiologist Julie Damp, M.D.

“There are a couple of different theories behind why that might be,” Damp said.

People who are married or who are in close, healthy relationships tend to be less likely to smoke, are more physically active and are more likely to have a well-developed social structure, she said. They are also more likely to have lower levels of stress and anxiety in their day-to-day lives.

“There is a theory that people who are in loving relationships may experience neuro-hormonal changes that have positive effects on the body, including the [cardiovascular system](#),” Damp said, explaining that there are certain hormone levels in the body that vary depending on the level of an individual’s stress and anxiety.

“This has not been proven, but the idea is that being in a relationship that is positive may have positive effects on your cardiovascular system over long periods of time,” Damp said. In fact, studies have shown that relationships that involve conflict or negativity are associated with an increase in risk for coronary artery disease.

Giving your loved one a box of dark chocolates and a bottle of red wine won’t hurt either. Studies suggest they are good for the heart, as well.

Dark [chocolate](#) contains flavonoids, which are antioxidants. Antioxidants have positive effects on many different body systems including the cardiovascular system. The high concentration of cocoa in dark chocolate appears to be what offers the flavonoid benefit.

“Dark chocolate has been shown to be associated with lower blood pressure, lower blood sugar levels and improvement in the way your blood vessels dilate and relax,” Damp said. Further study is needed to know exactly which type of chocolate and how much of it is the most beneficial, but studies have shown that people who eat chocolate more than once a week have lower risks of heart disease and stroke compare to people who eat it less frequently. “Fat and calorie content of chocolate also needs to be taken into consideration and kept consistent with a healthy, balanced diet,” Damp said.

Flavonoids are also present in red wine. Multiple observational studies have shown that moderate alcohol consumption, which is one drink a day for women and one to two for men, is associated with lower rates of cardiovascular events such as [heart](#) attacks.

However, Damp cautions that there is not enough evidence to encourage people who don’t currently drink to start drinking. There are potential negative health effects of long-term alcohol use, and the flavonoids found in [red wine](#) can be found in other food and drink like fruits and vegetables and grape juice, she said.

“A good message is that these things should be done in moderation and in conjunction with your physician’s plan for you to lower your cardiovascular risk,” Damp added.

Provided by Vanderbilt Medical Center

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