

Chocolate may be good medicine for liver patients

LONDON (Reuters) – Cocoa-rich dark chocolate could be prescribed for people with liver cirrhosis in future, following the latest research to show potential health benefits of chocolate.

Spanish researchers said Thursday that eating dark chocolate capped the usual after-meal rise in abdominal blood pressure, which can reach dangerous levels in cirrhotic patients and, in severe cases, lead to blood vessel rupture. Antioxidants called flavanols found in cocoa are believed to be the reason why chocolate is good for blood pressure because the chemicals help the smooth muscle cells of the blood vessels to relax and widen.

A study of 21 patients with end-stage liver disease found those given a meal containing 85 percent-cocoa dark chocolate had a markedly smaller rise in blood pressure in the liver, or portal hypertension, than those given white chocolate.

"This study shows a clear association between eating dark chocolate and (lower) portal hypertension and demonstrates the potential importance of improvements in the management of cirrhotic patients," said Mark Thursz, a professor of hepatology at London's Imperial College.

The results were presented at the annual meeting of the European Association for the Study of the Liver in Vienna and follow a number of earlier scientific studies suggesting that dark chocolate also promotes heart health.

Cirrhosis is scarring of the liver as a result of long-term damage. It is caused by various factors, including hepatitis infection and alcohol abuse.

(Reporting by Ben Hirschler; editing by Philippa Fletcher)