Eat chocolate, win the Nobel Prize?
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(Reuters) - Of all the chocolate research out there, the most unabashed tribute to the "dark gold" has to be a study just published in one of the world's most prestigious medical journals.

Drum roll, please. The higher a country's chocolate consumption, the more Nobel laureates it spawns per capita, according to findings released in the New England Journal of Medicine.

The Swiss, of course, lead the pack, closely followed by the Swedes and the Danes. The U.S. is somewhere in the middle and the nation would have to up its cocoa intake by a whopping 275 million pounds (125 million kg) a year to produce one more laureate, said Franz Messerli, who did the analysis.

"The amount it takes, it's actually quite stunning, you know," said Messerli, who runs the hypertension program at St Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital in New York.

"The Swiss eat 120 bars - that is, 3-ounce bars (85 grams) - per year, for every man, woman and child. That's the average." Messerli admitted the whole idea is absurd, although the data are legitimate and contain a few lessons about the fallibility of science.

He came up with the idea for the study after seeing a study that linked flavonoids, a type of antioxidants present in cocoa and wine, to better scores on cognitive tests. He began with industry data on chocolate intake in 23 countries and a list from Wikipedia ranking countries according to the number of Nobel laureates per capita.

"I started plotting this in a hotel room in Kathmandu, because I had nothing else to do, and I could not believe my eyes," he told Reuters Health. All the countries linked up neatly on a graph, with higher chocolate intake tied to more laureates.

It's not the first time scientists have found correlations that seem to defy all logic - and indeed may. The number of storks across Europe has been linked to birth rates, for instance, and sunspots have been tied to suicides in men.

Another possibility is that the link is real, but meaningless.

"National chocolate consumption is correlated with a country's wealth and high-quality research is correlated with a country's wealth," said Eric Cornell, an American physicist who shared the Nobel Prize for physics in 2001.

"So therefore chocolate is going to be correlated with high-quality research, but there is no causal connection there."

When it comes to chocolate, several researchers have suggested dark varieties might benefit the brain, the heart and even help cut excess weight.

Messerli, who is of Swiss origin, admits to daily chocolate consumption and said that despite the tongue-in-cheek tone, he does believe chocolate has real health effects - although people should stay away from the sweeter kinds.

"Personally I feel that milk chocolate makes you stupid," joked Cornell, who "attributed" his success to the large amount of chocolate he eats.

"Now dark chocolate is the way to go. It's one thing if you want like a medicine or chemistry Nobel Prize, ok, but if you want a physics Nobel Prize it pretty much has got to be dark chocolate."

But other researchers said the evidence is still far from impressive at best.

"Certainly I have never seen anything that has made me start adding (chocolate) to my diet," said Yoni Freedhoff, an assistant professor of family medicine at the University of Ottawa in Canada.

SOURCE: bit.ly/8H6vG1

(Reporting from New York by Frederik Joelving at Reuters Health; editing by Elaine Lies)