



Soy Healthful or Harmful?

In 1999 the FDA approved the statement, “Diets low in saturated fat and cholesterol that include 25 grams of soy protein a day may reduce the risks of heart disease.” Soy products have become much more popular ever since. A large number of people swear by the health benefits of soy and a multitude of high quality products make soy more available than ever before. From bars to protein supplements, cereal to soymilk, and soy burgers to soy ice cream, a plethora of soy products are now on grocery store shelves. Soy is also in many processed foods in the form of "textured vegetable protein" (TVP), "textured plant protein," "hydrolyzed vegetable protein" (HVP), "vegetable oil," or "MSG" (monosodium glutamate). As the health-promoting claims for soy grew from fighting heart disease to curing osteoporosis to decreasing risks for cancer and the severity of menopausal symptoms, more and more people jumped on the soy bandwagon. Touted as a miracle food, initial studies of increased dietary soy were promising.

Newer Findings

Over the years, one by one, most of the soy health claims have collapsed after further research. An Internet search turns up just as much information about the potential dangers of a high-soy diet as material supporting its health claims. The National Institute of Health suspended funding for new soy studies in 2005, after an expert government panel found insufficient evidence that soy prevents osteoporosis and heart disease or relieves the symptoms of menopause.

Soy and Heart Disease

In January of this year, an American Heart Association committee reviewed 22 studies and concluded, “Eating soy-based foods has only a minimal impact on cholesterol and other heart disease risk factors.” In addition, citing the questions of safety that had been raised in these 22 studies, this committee went on to make the statement, “For this reason, use of isoflavone supplements in food or pills is not recommended.”

Soy and Cancer

The American Cancer Society website offers the following information regarding the relationship between soy intake and cancer. “No solid evidence has shown that soy supplements reduce cancer risk, although human studies are inconclusive at this time. Another theory suggests that high doses of soy might increase the risk of estrogen-responsive cancers, such as breast or endometrial cancer in certain women. Breast cancer survivors should consume only moderate amounts of soy foods as part of a healthful, plant-based diet.”

Soy Infant Formulas

Soy infant formulas are consumed by 25% of American infants. A National Institute of Health panel in March concluded that there is not enough scientific data to determine

whether or not soy formula poses a health risk. They say that they are not overly concerned that the genistein (estrogen-like substance) in soy poses a developmental risk in infants. Soy formula has been used by 40 million infants and not shown “a blip on the radar screen” in health consequences. Studies have shown that genistein can interfere with hormonal function in rats and their offspring. Some studies have also implicated soy formula as a risk factor for premature breast development in girls. Interesting to note is that some countries restrict the use of soy formula to prescription-only status.

Soy and Menopause

With the negative news regarding hormone replacement therapy, soy has become a sought after “natural” alternative to decrease the annoying symptoms of menopause. Some women report that soy does help to decrease the frequency or intensity of hot flashes. Research results, however, are not consistent. Long term, well-designed studies are needed to determine if foods containing soy or pills containing soy isoflavones are effective at decreasing menopausal symptoms.

Osteoporosis

Three major studies now pending may shed more light on the effectiveness of soy in increasing bone density. The studies that have been done to date are inconclusive. Some indicate no benefit and others show some positive benefits. Again, the studies have not been consistently designed.

Other Concerns

A study by Lon White, MD, MPH at the University of Hawaii found that elderly people who ate tofu twice a week or more for 30 years were aging faster than normal.

Larrian Gillespie, MD finds that some women who use soy feel fatigued, constipated and achy all over. They gain weight and have heavy menstrual periods. Mistaking these symptoms for hormonal changes, they actually have slowed thyroid function. Once they stop using soy, they feel better.

Many people assume that soy has been used as a food for thousands of years in Asia. It actually was first used as food in China beginning in the Chou dynasty (1134-246 BC) in a fermented form (tempeh, natto, and tamari). Today, the average consumption of soy foods in Japan and China is now about 2 teaspoons a day.

The FDA has not provided GRAS (Generally Recognized as Safe) status for soy isoflavones or soy protein due to the concerns about toxins and carcinogens in processed soy.

Safe Intakes

If you are interested in adding soy to your diet or continuing with your favorite soy product, most experts agree that you should limit daily intake of isoflavones to no more than 50-70 mg. until more studies validating soy’s safety are completed. That amount of

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isoflavones is typically found in 1-2 cups of soymilk, 1-2 oz of soy nuts or 10 oz of soy yogurt.

Health Claims for Soy

- Helps to fight heart disease
- Eases osteoporosis
- Helps prevent cancer
- Decreases menopausal symptoms

Safety Concerns for Soy

- Thyroid dysfunction
- Cancer
- Reproductive Disorders
- Heart Disease
- Birth defects
- Infertility
- Immune system breakdown
- Malnutrition
- Digestive Disorders
- Cognitive decline

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