

Health Tips

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with

Dr. D



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Health Tip: Is there a link between soy products and breast cancer?

The relationship between soy products and breast cancer is a hotly debated topic. On the one hand, in Asia, where soy intake is much higher than in Western countries, breast cancer rates are considerably lower. On the other hand, it has been suspected that eating soy foods may stimulate the growth of estrogen-sensitive breast tumors. Which is it---does soy protect against or encourage the development of breast cancer?



Soy foods are the richest source of isoflavones in the human diet. Isoflavones are a class of phytoestrogens which are plant-derived compounds that bind to estrogen receptors and exhibit weak estrogen-like

effects. Soy foods include soy noodles, soy-based meat substitutes, soy milk, roasted soy beans, textured vegetable protein, and tofu. Phytoestrogens are also found in small amounts in a number of flax seed, legumes, grains and vegetables.

Concern regarding the potential for phytoestrogens to cause breast cancer has stemmed from two primary sources, 1) certain laboratory and animal studies that have shown that isoflavones can exert a stimulating effect on existing estrogen-sensitive breast tumors, and 2) the Women's Health Initiative (WHI) that demonstrated an increased risk of developing breast cancer among postmenopausal women taking hormone replacement therapy. Neither of these investigations, however, has definitively addressed the issue.

When human studies performed to investigate this relationship between soy food consumption and breast cancer risk are viewed together, a trend becomes apparent. In Asian women, whose diet is heavily soy-based, the risk for developing breast cancer goes down with increasing isoflavone consumption. In Western women with lower soy food intake, there does not appear to be a relationship between eating increased amount of soy foods and an increase in breast cancer. Overall, these data suggest that in normal women, soy foods have a protective effect against the development of breast cancer.

In regard to the WHI study, the highest risk of developing breast cancer was among those women who were taking combined (progesterin



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and estrogen) therapy, not estrogen alone. A second arm of the WHI study looked at women who had undergone hysterectomy and were taking estrogen alone. No significant increase in breast cancer risk was noted in this group. This was reaffirmed by the British "Million Women Study," that showed only a very slight increase in breast cancer risk

(about 1% to 3% increase per each year of use) among women who took estrogen without progestin. Considering the relatively low estrogenic properties of soy foods, it is doubtful that its effects are anywhere as potent as estrogens used in hormone replacement.

What about those women who have had breast cancer, particularly if the tumor was found to be estrogen-sensitive? Overall, data from available research does not suggest that soy consumption affects the survival of breast cancer patients, even those with estrogen-sensitive tumors. Consequently, moderate soy consumption by those breast cancer survivors is felt to be acceptable.

Overall, there is little clinical evidence to suggest that the phytoestrogens in soy foods will increase breast cancer risk in healthy women or worsen the prognosis of breast cancer patients. In fact, the evidence seems to indicate a protective effect of soy foods against the development of breast cancer.

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