



CONSUMER Health ALERT!



Dietary Soy Intake

SOY FOOD CONTROVERSY

Soy foods are derived from the soy bean, a common legume whose use originated in East Asia but whose consumption is now widespread in the Western world as well. Eating soy has become controversial recently due to several factors.

- First, soy has been introduced into so many packaged, processed foods that it is rapidly becoming a common allergen, especially among children. In fact, according to FARE (Food Allergy Research and Education) soy is among the top 8 most commonly allergenic foods in the USA. The more that a person is exposed to a potential allergen the more likely they are to develop an allergy. Therefore it is prudent to avoid over-exposure to common allergens.
- Second, soy beans grown in the USA are often genetically modified - also called "GMO." Many consumers would prefer not to eat genetically modified foods.

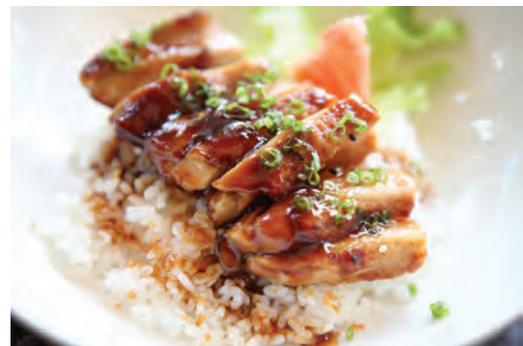
Furthermore, some people express concern that soy is estrogenic, and that it will increase estrogen levels in the body. The truth is somewhat more complex than that: soy does, indeed, contain phytoestrogens, which are plant compounds that are structurally similar to estrogen. However, soy does not actually contain the estrogenic hormones estradiol, estriol, or estrone. Soy's estrogenic activity is quite weak compared to endogenous estrogen-that is, the estrogen that the human body produces itself.





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In fact, soy's phytoestrogenic activity can be used to benefit health in some cases. Consumption of traditional soy foods may be protective against breast and prostate cancer, may lower cholesterol, may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, may reduce hot flashes in menopausal women, and may decrease fracture risk.



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One health risk of soy foods is that soy can interfere with thyroid function, worsening hypothyroidism (low thyroid function) in sensitive populations. In addition, early exposure to phytoestrogens (like infant soy formula) may have negative consequences on reproductive health, such as early puberty in girls. Research on the risks of soy intake and reproductive development is still inconclusive, however.

Clearly then, while soy and other phytoestrogens may confer some health benefits, there are some risks associated with soy intake- namely endocrine disruption, as in effects on thyroid function and potential effects on reproductive development. Until more research is collected, the best approach to dietary soy intake is probably to eat soy only in moderation, and to eat traditional soy foods as have been consumed in East Asia for centuries. Processed soy analog foods (fake soy "meats" like soy hot dogs, soy lunch meat, etc.) are not the best way to consume soy. When eating soy, it's preferable to select fermented soy foods like tempeh and miso, as well as tofu and edamame.

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