Soy and Health

(Excerpted from article at PCRM.org)

Soy foods have recently enjoyed increasing popularity. Soy foods include soybeans (also called edamame) and any other foods made from soybeans, including soymilk, tofu, tempeh, miso, and vegetarian meat and dairy substitutes, like soy meats and soy cheeses. Like most other plant foods, the most healthful choices in soy foods are those that are minimally processed so they retain all of their original nutrients. But because soy products are so widely consumed, some people have raised the question as to whether they are safe. Let's take a look at what medical studies show:

Cancer Prevention and Survival

Epidemiological studies have found that soy protein may reduce the risk for can-cers including breast, colon, and prostate.

Studies show that women who include soy products in their routine are less likely to develop breast cancer, compared with other women. In January 2008, researchers at the University of Southern California found that women averaging one cup of soymilk or about one-half cup of tofu daily have about a 30 percent less risk of developing breast cancer, compared with women who have little or no soy products in their diets. However, to be effective, the soy consumption may have to occur early in life, as breast tissue is forming during adolescence.

Why should soy products reduce cancer risk? Most research has zeroed in on *phytoestrogens* found in soybeans. (*Phyto* means "plant.") These compounds are in some ways similar to the estrogens (female sex hormones) in a woman's blood-stream, but are much weaker. Some have suggested that they may keep estrogen levels under control as they can act both like a weak estrogen when body estrogen levels are low and can inhibit estrogen's effects when body estrogen levels are high.

By analogy, the estrogens in a woman's body are like jumbo jets that have landed at an airport. Phytoestrogens are like small private planes that are occupying the Jetways, blocking the jumbo jets from attaching. This explanation is probably overly simplistic, but it may serve to illustrate how soy's weak hormonal compounds can have beneficial effects.

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