

Soy and Breast Cancer

There has been confusion about the connection between soy and breast cancer, but experts agree that individuals who have been diagnosed with breast cancer can safely eat soy foods. Some nutrients in soy have chemical structures that look similar to the estrogen made in the body. This is where the term “phytoestrogen” (which means “plant estrogen”) comes from. However, phytoestrogens are not the same as human estrogens—and soy foods do not contain human estrogen.

Understand the Research

There have been several large research studies looking at the soy intake of thousands of women over many years. These observational studies indicate that women who regularly eat soy have a lower risk for breast cancer than women who do not eat soy. Some of these studies also suggest that breast cancer survivors who eat soy foods have a lower risk of breast cancer recurrence compared with those who do not eat soy. Most experts agree that the evidence is not strong enough to *recommend* that all people with a history of breast cancer eat more soy. However, eating soy foods does appear to be safe and possibly helpful for breast cancer survivors.

Current observational studies cannot prove cause and effect—that is, they cannot prove that soy itself *causes* a decreased risk of breast cancer and its recurrence. However, these studies are reassuring in showing that soy foods do not increase the risk of breast cancer. They point toward a protective effect of soy on breast health, regardless of other lifestyle and diet choices.

Food First

Soy foods are a healthy option, while soy supplements may not be. The research on soy and breast cancer has looked at soy foods, not supplements. If you need extra calories during cancer treatment from a high-protein, high-calorie nutritional beverage, the soy protein in this type of product is not a problem. However, soy pills and isoflavone-enriched powders should be avoided.

If you're concerned about your breast health, choose healthy, whole soy foods like tofu, tempeh, soy milk, and edamame instead of soy powders and pills. As with all plant foods, the less processed the food is, the better.

In the end, feel confident in whatever choice you make about soy foods. Eat these foods if you enjoy them, or skip them altogether if soy isn't to your liking.

