

Commonly Asked Questions About Soy - An Interview with Dr. Pam Popper

Q: Do you still recommend soy to your clients?

A: I continue to recommend soy foods as a great source of protein, and as part of a varied, plant-based diet.

Q: Are you concerned at all with the negative information circulating about soy?

A: I'm not for several reasons, the first being the source of the information. Much of it comes from the members of the Weston Price Foundation, an organization that promotes a diet rich in animal protein and fat. With little to no scientific evidence, these members are basing their recommendations on the observations of a dentist who traveled the world taking pictures of teeth in primitive populations. He surmised that the reason for the superior dental health of these people was their diets, which was most likely the case. He also observed that these people were consuming raw milk and other animal foods., and concluded that these foods were responsible for the excellent dental health of his subjects. However, he did not collect data on the total diets of these people, their biomarkers or their mortality and disease rates. Had he done so, he would have learned that infant mortality was very high, the infection rate was high, and that many of these people experienced shortened life expectancy.

What the members of the Weston Price Foundation lack in scientific data, they make up for in activity. They write letters, post information on the internet and are active in setting up chapters to spread the world about Dr. Price's pictures of teeth.

For more information on this group, there is an article on the Foundation in Health Briefs vol.9.

Q: I have looked at some of the articles written by members of the Foundation and they do have some scientific references.

A: You are correct. However, citing a journal article does not automatically mean that a statement is correct. First, the reference has to be relevant to the statement for which it is used as a reference. In looking at some of the references in some articles, the relevance was questionable. For example, a study that involved the administration of high doses of an isolated nutrient found in soy to mice has little to do with humans eating tofu as part of a plant-based diet. The construction of studies is also very important and provides important clues as to the validity of the research.

Additionally, all research must be evaluated in consideration of the preponderance of the scientific evidence. In today's world, almost anyone can come up with a study to support almost anything. However, when reviewing the evidence, the body of available research will either discredit the information or strengthen it.

A good example is the dairy industry's use of a "study" that shows that dairy consumption positively influences weight loss. It is true that a study conducted at the University of Tennessee showed a positive correlation between dairy consumption and weight loss. However, the dairy industry paid the "researcher" \$1.7 million for his efforts, and almost all of the other published research on the topic showed the opposite to be true.

I have not seen reliable scientific evidence concerning adverse effects of consuming soy, many of the studies referenced by these people are poorly constructed or have little relevance, and the preponderance of the evidence indicates that soy foods are beneficial as part of a well-structured plant-based diet.

Q: How do you respond to statements such as that soy is bad for boys, that it causes men to become impotent, etc.?

A: There are lots of articles in the Health Briefs series that deal with these issues, so I won't review them here. I'll reiterate that considering the source of the information goes a long way in discrediting the statements being made.

Q: Yes, but there are so many doctors who are into alternative medicine who are anti-soy as well.

A: The fact that a medical doctor or other health care professional has announced that he or she is "into alternative medicine" does not mean that he or she is right.

I am highly critical of traditional medicine. But, I am just as critical of medical doctors who are dispensing information about diet and other matters without appropriate training. Many of them have taken a few courses and attended a few Continuing Education courses, and although they may be awakened to other ways of preventing or treating disease, are far from well-trained as to how to do so. I certainly wish I could have obtained the knowledge I have by reading a few books and getting 12 CE units, but it took years and tens of thousands of dollars to do so. Many of these very well-intentioned individuals are giving out wrong information.

On the other hand, many professionals in the natural health field are equally misinformed. There are a variety of reasons for this - aligning themselves with the wrong people and organizations, relying on poor scientific information, and adopting the same reductionist view of health as traditional professionals - these are just a few.

One common problem is relying on short term studies that have little to do with long-term health. Oncologists often justify chemotherapy by telling patients that they can shrink tumors in a few weeks. This may be true, but if, in the long term, most of the patients are dead, this means little.

Many practitioners likewise are relying on short-term studies showing positive changes in a biomarker or two for a few weeks as a result of taking a dietary supplement. But we know that manipulating biomarkers in the short term is not a barometer of health for the long-term, which makes this information virtually meaningless.

The point I am trying to make here is that a declaration in the belief of alternative therapies does not make one right, or even responsible in terms of recommendations concerning diet and health.

Q: How much soy is "enough?"

A: There is no quota for soy consumption daily, and it is important to remember that healthier populations consuming soy are doing so as part of a healthy, well-constructed, plant-based diet.

The Wellness Forum diet is not a "soy promotion" diet. It simply recommends soy as part of a varied, healthful diet for most people.

Q: What about people who are allergic to soy?

A: They should not consume it, but there are actually few people who are allergic to soy. It seems like it is a bigger problem than it is for two reasons. First, there are so many practitioners who have decided that everyone should avoid soy, and are convincing many people who are not allergic that they are.

And, the introduction of genetically engineered soy foods is definitely a factor. Soy is today the most common genetically engineered food in the world, and we know that GE soy has a different nutrient profile than "normal" soy foods, and contains genes from other types of organisms. Prior to GE soy, soy was not on the top 10 list of allergens, but it quickly made it to that last when GE soy products became widely available. We have had many clients over the years that did not experience allergic reactions once they converted to non-GMO soy foods.

Q: How do you avoid genetically modified soy foods?

A: Organic soy foods are not genetically modified, and they are readily available in almost every store these days.

Q: What about breast cancer patients who are told by their doctors to avoid soy foods?

A: First, it is important to get information from good sources, and with all due respect, I don't think most doctors are the best source of information about nutrition. I wrote an editorial on this topic, which can be found in the archived newsletter section of our website.

But the scientific evidence is even more important and does not show that soy is contraindicated for women who have or have had breast cancer. There are articles with references about this topic in the Health Briefs series.

Women who want to avoid estrogen-positive breast cancer must lower their estrogen levels, and the reality is that most American women have high estrogen levels. This results from carrying extra weight and body fat (the goal should be body fat of 20% or less), not exercising, and consuming a high-fat diet containing lots of animal protein and inadequate fiber. Breast cancer, or a recurrence of it, is best avoided by practicing dietary excellence and optimal habits.

Q: Can you consume too much soy?

Q: You can consume too much of anything, and a common problem in the diets of even healthy eaters is lack of variety. It is best to try to consume as many different foods as possible on a daily basis.

Q: Sometimes it's just hard to know who to believe.

Q: That's only true if you veer from considering reliable scientific evidence that is evaluated in consideration of the preponderance of the evidence.