

Ask Anya

Anya Todd is a vegan registered and licensed dietitian who graduated from Case Western reserve University and completed her internship at the Cleveland Clinic foundation. She simply does not understand why people cringe when she eats plain tofu straight from the carton.



Q: *What is the deal with soy – is it safe to eat or not?*

Is it really good for us?

Does it cause cancer?

Will it make men grow breasts?

How much is safe to eat?

The issue of soy and its effect on our health is much debated. These questions always arise when I give vegan nutrition lectures. With all of the misinformation about soy being dispersed out there (mostly by industries opposed to a plant-based diet), it is no wonder that there is mass confusion about this precious bean.

Soy foods, like tofu and soy milk, are staples in many vegans' pantries because they are plentiful in protein and other nutrients, like B vitamins. They are free of artery-clogging saturated fat and cholesterol. What many soy myths focus upon is the "phytoestrogens" found in soybeans, called isoflavones, and how these compounds can cause breast cancer. There are people who claim that the isoflavones will act as the female sex hormone, estrogen, would in the body and hence, potentially increase the risk of cancers (especially breast), as well as reduce testosterone levels in men.

Science, based on well-planned research studies, has yet to uphold any of these claims. Often the studies quoted by those opposed to soy have been conducted on animals in labs who are injected with amounts of isoflavones that far exceed normal human consumption. To apply such a study's findings to humans would be pretty poor science. Thankfully, there are researchers who understand that

studying real-life humans is a more informative option. The latest research recently followed women in Asia and showed that pre-menopausal soy consumption has a protective effect in regard to breast cancer. At this time, there is no reason to believe soy causes cancer. As far as men and soy consumption goes, there are over 30 studies which conclude that one's manliness will not be affected. The few studies that may be cited by the naysayers are again poorly designed. Just from observation, I know a fair share of vegan, soy-consuming men who are leading satisfying love lives, reproducing without issue and have yet to sprout man boobs.

I am baffled by the amount of soy backlash when the recommended alternative is cow's milk, which is loaded with hormones and growth factors, and designed to increase a calf's size nearly tenfold in a year.

Bottom line, soy, like any other foods, should be consumed in moderation and ideally be as unprocessed as possible. 2-3 servings a day is a safe recommendation. A serving counts as 1 cup of soy milk or a ½ cup of tofu, tempeh or soybeans. That means the grande pumpkin spice soy latte I had earlier was my soy source for the day, and it was worth every sip. Remember, soy is not your only plant-based protein option. Legumes, seitan, seeds (like quinoa & hemp) and nuts are excellent protein sources that can be included in any well-balanced diet. So, enjoy that tofu scramble and don't let the soy fear mongers get you down.