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## Soy as a Super Food

By Suzanne Dixon MPH, MS, RD

The list of so-called “super foods” is long indeed. It ranges from the berry of the week – think acai and goji – to sweet potatoes, nuts, and more. One food that sometimes makes the list, but maybe not as often as it should, is soy.

There is no precise definition of a super food, which is why claims for super foods abound. When you’re trying to decide if the latest “super food” truly is super, it may help to consider a concept called nutrient density. Nutrient density refers to the amount of nutrients in a given volume of food.

Consider, for example, one cup of blueberries and one cup of regular soda. Both are one cup in volume, but the blueberries pack a far bigger nutritional punch than the soda. The soda is sugar and not much else. No vitamins, no important minerals, no phytonutrients...it’s just plain sugar.

Blueberries, on the other hand, are loaded with healthful nutrients. They provide fiber, potassium, vitamin C, and countless phytonutrients, called anthocyanins and polyphenols. These phytonutrients are linked with lowered risk of several chronic diseases. You get all of this for a mere 80 calories, 20% fewer calories than you find in a cup of soda.

### What’s So Super?

By this standard, soy really does belong on the super food list. Soy is loaded with protein and phytonutrients called isoflavones. Eating a diet rich in isoflavones has been linked with lower risk of several types of cancer, heart disease, and osteoporosis. Soy also provides calcium, potassium, iron, and zinc, plus B vitamins, folate, and vitamin A.

As scientists have unraveled the mysteries of the soybean, the potential health benefits of consuming soy-based Asian staples, such as tofu, tempeh, miso, edamame, and soymilk have become clearer. We’ve got the scoop about soy and its super benefits for men, women, and kids.

### Men and Soy

Soy may be one way of lessening the prostate cancer threat. Given the impact of the disease, this is no small thing. About 217,000 men will be diagnosed with the

disease and more than 32,000 men will lose their lives to prostate cancer in the US this year. Anything that can decrease prostate cancer risk has big implications for men’s health.

How does soy work? In several ways, it turns out. Soy seems to dampen inflammation in the prostate. Inflammation can damage cells making them more prone to cancer. Soy contains potent antioxidants too, which limit oxidation, another damaging process that may spur cells to turn cancerous.

Even more interesting? Soy may provide benefit even after prostate cancer has developed. Soy nutrients appear to inhibit the growth and spread of prostate cancer cells. Perhaps this is why, as many prostate cancer experts say, “Asian men die with prostate cancer and American men die of prostate cancer.”

Many health experts believe that soy plays a role in keeping prostate cancer confined to the prostate, where it won’t threaten a man’s life. Believe it or not, nearly as many Asian men seem to develop prostate cancer as American men, they just don’t die from the disease. Soy may be part of the reason why.

### Women and Soy

When thinking about soy foods many women focus on breast health. But some of the biggest soy benefits have nothing to do with the breast. Think instead about what’s inside your chest – your ticker. Heart disease kills far more women than breast cancer. In fact, heart disease kills more women than men!

Fifty-two percent of all cardiovascular deaths occur in women. In 2006, cardiovascular disease claimed the lives of 432,709 women in the US. Breast cancer killed 40,821 women. All forms of cancer combined killed 269,819 women in 2006, still far fewer than heart disease. This is where soy can help.

Whole soy foods, such as tofu and soy milk, are moderate to high in protein, contain no saturated fat, and provide other important heart healthy nutrients such as calcium. If soy replaces other foods that are high in saturated fat, this substitution alone can provide measurable heart health benefits.

As well, soy provides antioxidants that may keep cholesterol from becoming oxidized. Why does this matter? Because it is oxidized cholesterol that is most prone to

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sticking to our blood vessels, where it can wreak havoc and increase heart attack risk.

In short, women may think of heart disease as a “man’s disease,” but nothing could be further from the truth. Along with exercising, a total healthy diet, and maintaining a healthy body weight, eating more whole soy foods may be a way to help women get their heart health back on track.

## Kids and Soy

Soy may have benefits for kids, and in particular, for girls. Much of the US research on soy and breast cancer has focused on adult women, but all the action may be with girls, babies, and even time spent in the womb.

Women living in countries with a soy-based traditional diet enjoy a lower breast cancer risk. The question is why. To get the full picture, you need to go back, way back.

While soy appears to protect women in Asia against breast cancer, the connection is less clear among American women. Many health experts believe this is because we haven’t taken into account soy consumption among girls and among mothers when they are pregnant and breast-feeding.

Studies suggest that the full breast health benefits of soy come from a lifetime of exposure to whole soy foods, including tofu, tempeh, edamame, miso, and soy milk (sometimes referred to as “bean sauce” in Asian cultures). Babies, girls, and women in Asia get the full breast health benefit, because soy is built right into the culture.

## Soy Still Helpful

But if you’re already an adult woman, fear not. The breast cancer prevention effects of soy may be greatest for those consuming it their entire lives, but even female soy newbies appear to have lower breast cancer risk than their non-soy-eating sisters. Plus, eating soy foods after breast cancer has been associated with a reduced risk of breast cancer recurrence among American breast cancer survivors too.

The key is to focus on traditional, whole soy foods, including tofu, soymilk, tempeh, and edamame. Steer clear of concentrated soy supplements, pills, and processed foods touting added soy. These have not been shown to provide the same benefit as more healthful whole-food soy fare.

## The Soy Bottom Line

When we consider just a few of the potential benefits of whole soy foods, it becomes clear that this Asian-diet staple deserves a place of prominence in the American diet. Whether you’re man, woman, or child, make soy a part of your eating plan and start reaping the health benefits today.

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You should always consult with your physician prior to changing or undertaking a new diet or exercise program.

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