

# to your health



A newsletter about good foods  
for better health from Vitasoy®

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Vitasoy USA Inc. One New England Way Ayer, MA 01432 Tel: 978-772-6880 www.vitasoy-usa.com



## Breast Health

Committed to health and well-being, Vitasoy offers the *Breast Health Newsletter* to help consumers understand the link between breast health and the food we eat--in particular, "soy". Research on this topic is constantly emerging and most

of us find it difficult to interpret its collective meaning. Toward empowering consumers to make more informed decisions about including soy in their diet, Vitasoy reached out to internationally recognized cancer nutrition expert and epidemiologist, Suzanne Dixon, MPH, MS, RD. As always, if you have questions or concerns about health related issues, please talk to your doctor.

### Q: Is there anything you can do to reduce your risk of developing breast cancer?

A: Breast cancer is a frightening disease and seemingly strikes at random. While it is true that there are many things health experts don't understand about breast cancer, there is a lot that we do know! We know that some things which increase risk, such as getting older, gender, and certain genetic factors are out of our control. That's the bad news. But the good news is that many things which reduce breast cancer risk are 100% in our control. Maintaining a healthy body weight, eating a healthy diet, exercising regularly, and using alcohol in moderation or not at all are proven ways to reduce risk of breast cancer and/or breast cancer recurrence. Rather than focusing on those things we can't control, we need to learn to take care of ourselves and reduce our risk using the things we can control.

### Q: How do diet and exercise affect breast cancer risk?

A: There are many ways in which our dietary and exercise choices may affect our breast cancer risk. This includes alcohol use, body weight, physical activity, and some dietary factors.

Regular **alcohol use** is one clearly established risk factor for breast cancer. Recent study results presented at the 2007 European Cancer Conference in Barcelona, Spain indicate that the type of alcohol does not really matter. Regardless of whether a woman consumes beer, wine, or hard liquor, having more than one alcoholic drink per day seems to increase breast cancer risk. This increased risk does **not** show up for women who consume less than one drink per day on average. In other words, if you want to enjoy alcohol, do so in moderation, having no more than one drink per day, only a few times per week. One drink is 5 ounces of wine, 12 ounces of beer, or 1 ounce of hard liquor. For reference, keep in mind that one measuring cup is 8 ounces.

**Higher body weight**, especially in childhood and adolescence, and after menopause, increases risk of breast cancer. Being overweight during childhood and adolescence can cause girls to begin menstruating at a younger age. Health experts believe earlier start of menstruation in young girls may lead to a higher risk of breast cancer later in life. As well, being overweight as an adult, especially if you are overweight after going through menopause, increases risk of breast cancer and/or breast cancer recurrence.

Regular **physical activity** (exercise), at all ages and stages of life, is protective against breast cancer. Girls who exercise regularly as they grow up and women

who exercise throughout adulthood have a lower risk of breast cancer than women who do not exercise. This is due, in part, to the fact that women who exercise regularly typically are thinner than non-exercising women. Girls who exercise also tend to be thinner and have later onset of menstruation than non-exercising girls, which is protective against later breast cancer development. Physical activity itself reduces risk as well, likely by keeping levels of estrogen in the body lower over time.

Finally, certain **dietary factors** may be related to risk of breast cancer. Eating excess calories, in other words, eating more food than your body needs, increases breast cancer risk. The most obvious indication of excess calories is excess weight. Beyond calories, the connection between diet and breast cancer is less clear. In general, eating a low fat diet that is rich in vegetables, fruit, whole grains, and legumes (beans); eating plenty of cruciferous vegetables; and limiting saturated and hydrogenated fats is likely to help keep breast cancer at bay.

Many women wonder about the connection between soy food and breast cancer. Based on available data, it appears that soy food may decrease breast cancer risk or have little effect on risk. It is unlikely that regular consumption of traditional and whole soy foods, such as tofu, soymilk, tempeh, edamame, and miso will increase breast cancer risk.

Q: Are soy foods, including soymilk and tofu, beneficial to women with a history of breast cancer?

A: Based on research to date, soy foods are safe for people with a history of hormone-sensitive cancer, including breast cancer, when consumed as part of a healthy diet. If soy replaces higher fat animal foods, it is likely to better support overall health because it is saturated fat- and cholesterol-free, high in protein, and a good source of calcium and other vitamins and minerals. Soymilk and other whole soy foods including tofu, tempeh, and edamame have many cancer fighting properties, many of which have nothing to do with the highly publicized “phytoestrogen” content of these foods. Soy **supplements** likely have contributed to the misperceptions about the soy-breast cancer link. Some

studies show that concentrated soy supplements, since they don't use the whole soy bean, may not be safe for individuals with a history of hormone-sensitive cancer. However, there is quite a bit of research that whole soy foods such as soymilk and tofu can be a part of a healthy diet.

In the American Cancer Society report *Nutrition and Physical Activity During and After Cancer Treatment: The American Cancer Society Guide for Informed Choices*, this organization notes that for the breast cancer survivor, current evidence suggests there are unlikely to be harmful effects when soy is provided in the diet consistent with amounts in a typical Asian diet. This may be as much as three servings per day of soy foods such as tofu and soy milk.

The most important thing to remember is that you don't want to rely on soy foods alone to improve the diet. No one food will make or break your healthy diet and soy is no exception. You need to focus on total diet improvement for the best cancer prevention benefit.

Q: Should we serve soy food to our children to protect them from developing breast cancer later in life?

A: Interest in how soy may improve health in adults remains high, but an additional piece of the puzzle that is generating more excitement lately is the role that soy and diet play in health at various stages of life. Current studies suggest that exposure to soy foods at different times of life may influence later risk of breast cancer. Researchers are paying particular attention to diet during periods of rapid breast tissue growth and change, such as in utero (in the womb) and during childhood and adolescence.

Noted soy expert and researcher Mark Messina comments, “When it comes to soy and breast cancer, the most exciting hypothesis continues to be that intake during **adolescence** is the key to protection,”

Only more research and longer term studies will help answer this question, but in the mean time, there is no reason for children to avoid soy food. And based on studies to date, it is much more likely that childhood exposure to soy foods will decrease risk of breast cancer later in life rather than increase it.

To reduce risk of breast cancer, focus on a variety of lifestyle changes that can improve health.

- Maintain a healthy body weight. Consult a dietitian and/or join a weight loss support program for help with this. Research shows that these approaches, particularly when used together, can help with weight management in breast cancer survivors.
- Don't "put all of your eggs in one basket". Don't put so much energy into eating a healthy diet that you fail to keep yourself physically active. Likewise, don't spend so much time exercising that you don't have time to prepare and enjoy healthy meals and snacks. One recent study demonstrated that a combination of healthy diet (5 or more servings of vegetables and fruit per day) **plus** regular moderate exercise (30 minutes of brisk walking per day) reduced risk of breast cancer recurrence in survivors by nearly 50%!
- Focus on eating plenty of colorful vegetables and fruit every day, but don't place unnecessary guilt on yourself if you aren't perfect in your eating habits. Moderation is important and diet is not all "black and white" or "good and bad".
- Focus on a low fat diet. Try to keep your fat intake as low as you can, because people commonly eat more fat than they realize. Don't feel badly though. Most everyone has this problem. Limit high fat meats, snack foods, baked goods, and dessert items, and try to include cholesterol free, low fat protein sources such as tofu, tempeh, and soymilk.
- When you do eat fat, go for the healthy sources such as flaxseeds, other nuts and seeds, olive oil, and fatty fish.
- Use alcohol only in moderation or not at all. Have no more than one drink per day just a few times each week.
- Be physically active **every** day. You do not have to run a marathon! Remember that just 30 minutes of brisk walking each day is enough to provide health benefit. Make exercise time for yourself and view this as taking care of you. Your good health is a gift to you and your loved ones.
- Work with your healthcare team to take all of the steps you can to keep yourself healthy after a cancer diagnosis. This includes regular screening and cancer surveillance tests and frequent discussions with your doctor or nurse to make sure you have all the information you need to make informed choices.
- Don't feel guilty about what you "could have, should have, or would have" done with your diet and exercise routines to prevent cancer. Take this opportunity to make the best choices you can from here on out. The goal is to keep yourself as healthy as you can by eating well, exercising moderately, enjoying the support and love of family and friends, and figuring out what hobbies or activities you enjoy to relax, manage stress, and feel good.

Source: Suzanne Dixon, MPH, MS, RD of [www.caring4cancer.com](http://www.caring4cancer.com).

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