FOOD

MAGNIFICENT
miso soup

A bowl of healthy living

Amber Lanier Nagle

According to Japanese folklore, miso, the dark brown paste made from fermented soybeans, was a gift from the gods to ensure health and longevity. Miso soup has been a staple of Asian diets for thousands of years, and today it's gaining interest in other areas of the world as well.

Studies are confirming that a steaming bowl of savoury miso soup (also known as misoshiru) possesses numerous health-promoting benefits. It's not only rich in antioxidants and protective fatty acids, but it's also loaded with healthy doses of manganese, zinc, and copper.

Furthermore, miso, as well as many other soy-based foods, contains isoflavones—a type of phytoestrogen that may have protective effects against some cancers.

REDUCING THE RISK OF BREAST CANCER

A study published in 2003 in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute found that women who frequently consumed miso soup and other isoflavone-rich soy food products had a greatly reduced risk of developing breast cancer. Researchers observed over 21,000 Japanese women (aged 40 to 59 years old) who participated in the Japan Public Health Center-based Prospective Study on Cancer and Cardiovascular Diseases.

Thirty-four percent of the women indicated on questionnaires that they ate three or more bowls of miso soup per day. Over a 10-year period, this group of women exhibited a 40 percent lower risk of developing breast cancer than the women who reported eating less than one bowl of miso soup per day. Although this risk reduction was demonstrated for both premenopausal and postmenopausal women, it was more pronounced in postmenopausal subjects.

MISO SOUP AND WEIGHT CONTROL

Findings from a 2006 study suggested that consuming miso soup can also be an effective component in weight control. Researchers at Hokkaido University in Japan found that wakame, a brown seaweed used to flavour miso soup, contains a pigment that promoted a 5 to 10 percent weight loss in laboratory mice by reducing the accumulation of fat.

The research team found that the pigment, called fucoxanthin, stimulated UCP1, a protein that caused fat oxidation and conversion of energy to heat among obese test animals. Since the protein is found in white adipose tissue, researchers hypothesized that fucoxanthin might be particularly effective in reducing belly fat. The study results also suggested that fucoxanthin stimulated the liver to produce DHA, a type of omega-3 fatty acid commonly found in supplements designed to battle obesity.

Science is just beginning to uncover the tremendous health and wellness potential of magnificent miso soup.

Mmm—MISO SOUP

Miso soup is quick and easy to prepare. Add 1/3 to 1/2 cup (80 to 125 mL) of miso paste to 6 cups (1.5 L) of water or dashi (a Japanese cooking stock). Heat slowly over low heat, stirring and dissolving miso as it warms.

Eat as is, or add tofu, noodles, or vegetables such as shiitake mushrooms, scallions, carrots, daikon radishes, cabbage, or wakame. Add a dash of vinegar and hot sauce for even more flavour. Simmer and serve warm.

Amber Lanier Nagle is a freelance writer specializing in articles that promote healthy living and wellness. Her work has appeared in Natural Awakenings, American Fitness, and Mother Earth News.