QUICK STUDIES

Soy & Breast Cancer

If you've had breast cancer, soy foods may lower your risk of dying, according to a Chinese study that tracked roughly 5,000 breast cancer patients for an average of four years.

Women who consumed the most soy protein (at least 11 grams a day) had a 30 percent lower risk of dying of breast cancer than those who ate the least soy protein (5 grams a day or less). The results held for women with either estrogen-positive or estrogen-negative tumors and for those taking tamoxifen or not.

Women who consumed the most isoflavones (more than about 60 milligrams a day) from foods had roughly a 25 percent lower risk of dying or having their cancer recur than those who ate the least isoflavones (20 mg a day or less). Isoflavones are estrogen-like substances in plants that sometimes boost—and sometimes counter—the effects of the estrogen that the body produces. Unprocessed soy foods are rich in isoflavones.

What to do: Until this study is confirmed by others, it's too early to know if soy can lower the risk that breast cancer will recur. However, it looks like soy won't raise your risk, as two preliminary studies in the 1990s had suggested.

If you want to eat more soy, don't go overboard. Risk didn't drop further among women who ate more than 11 grams of soy protein a day. Your best bet is to try soy milk or whole soy foods (like tofu, edamame, miso, and soybeans) that are eaten in Asia, rather than processed foods (like soy-based bars or "meats") or isoflavone pills. A 3 oz. serving of firm tofu has roughly 8 grams of protein. A Starbucks grande soy latte has 9 grams.

What about women who haven't had breast cancer? There are too few studies to know whether soy can lower their risk (see Nutrition Action, Nov. 2009, p. 8).

Folic Acid & the Colon

Folic acid may lower the risk of precancerous colon or rectal polyps, but only in people who start out with low blood levels of the B vitamin (which is also called folate).

Researchers randomly assigned 672 people who had already been diagnosed with at least one precancerous polyp (adenoma) to take either 1,000 micrograms of folic acid or a placebo every day. After three to six years, the risk of a second polyp was 40 percent lower in folic acid takers who started the study with low blood levels of folate (less than 7.5 ng/mL), especially if they drank more alcohol, which impairs the absorption of folic acid. However, folic acid had no impact on people with higher folate levels.

In contrast to an earlier trial, folic acid takers had no higher risk of polyps.

What to do: If you've been diagnosed with a colon or rectal polyp, it may be worth taking an ordinary multivitamin (which typically has 400 mcg of folic acid) every day. While it's reassuring that 1,000 mcg of folic acid didn't raise the risk of polyps, there's no reason to take such a high dose.

Good sources of folate include fruits, vegetables, and beans.


Gink-No-Go

Ginkgo biloba won't keep your mind sharp as you age, says a large study.

Researchers gave more than 3,000 people aged 72 to 96 either ginkgo biloba (240 milligrams) or a placebo every day. After six years, the ginkgo takers were no less likely to be diagnosed with mild cognitive impairment (which often leads to dementia). Nor were there differences on tests of memory, attention, language, or other measures of thinking ability.

What to do: Don't rely on ginkgo to maintain your memory. Instead, exercise daily, lose excess weight, and keep your blood pressure under control (see Nutrition Action, Apr. 2009, cover story).


COFFEE, TEA, OR DIABETES?

People who drink more regular coffee, decaf, or tea may lower their risk of diabetes.

Scientists pooled the results of 18 studies on diabetes and coffee that tracked a total of more than 450,000 people in the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Finland, Sweden, the Netherlands, and other countries. (About a third of the studies also looked at tea and decaffeinated coffee.)

People who drank at least three or four cups of regular coffee a day had a 35 percent lower risk, while those who drank that much tea had about a 20 percent lower risk.

What to do: We won't know if coffee or tea can prevent diabetes until scientists test whether rates are lower in people who are randomly assigned to drink one or the other instead of a placebo. In the meantime, enjoy your coffee or tea. Just don't rush over to Starbucks for a 600-calorie venti Java Chip Frappuccino.
