

Soy: Is it Healthy or is it Harmful?

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In recent years soy has emerged as a 'near perfect' food, with supporters claiming it can provide an ideal source of protein, lower cholesterol, protect against cancer and heart disease, reduce menopause symptoms, and prevent osteoporosis, among other things. But how did such a 'perfect' food emerge from a product that in 1913 was listed in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) handbook not as a food but as an industrial product?

According to lipid specialist and nutritionist Mary Enig, PhD, "The reason there's so much soy in America is because they [the soy industry] started to plant soy to extract the oil from it and soy oil became a very large industry. Once they had as much oil as they did in the food supply they had a lot of soy protein residue left over, and since they can't feed it to animals, except in small amounts, they had to find another market."

And another market was what they found. To put it simply, after multi-million dollar figures spent on advertising and intense lobbying to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), about 74 percent of U.S. consumers now believe soy products are healthy.

If you're thinking the health claims surrounding soy sound too good to be true you just may be right. Soy has become another misunderstood food category, to be added to the ranks of [coconut oil](#), [saturated fats](#) and [vegetable oils](#). The two former have gained a negative reputation where a good one actually applies, but vegetable oil, along with soy, have emerged with sparkling reputations that cover up the truth.

For just a brief look at what's really going on, consider that numerous studies have found that soy products may:

- [Increase the risk of breast cancer](#) in women, brain damage in both men and women, and abnormalities in infants
- [Contribute to thyroid disorders](#), especially in women
- [Promote kidney stones](#)
- [Weaken the immune system](#)
- [Cause severe, potentially fatal food allergies](#)

Soy products also contain:

- Phytoestrogens (isoflavones) genistein and daidzein, which mimic and sometimes block the hormone estrogen
- Phytates, which block the body's uptake of minerals
- Enzyme Inhibitors, which hinder protein digestion
- Haemagglutinin, which causes red blood cells to clump together and inhibits oxygen take-up and growth

Further, most soybeans are grown on farms that use toxic pesticides and herbicides, and many are from genetically engineered plants. When you consider that two-thirds of all manufactured food products contain some form of soy, it becomes clear just how many Americans are consuming GM products, whose long-term effects are completely unknown.

Perhaps the most disturbing of soy's ill effects on health has to do with its phytoestrogens that can mimic the effects of the female hormone estrogen. These phytoestrogens have been found to have adverse effects on various human tissues, and drinking even two glasses of soy milk daily for one month has enough of the chemical to alter a woman's menstrual cycle. The FDA regulates estrogen-containing products, however no warnings exist on soy. Two senior toxicologists with the FDA, Daniel Sheehan and Daniel Doerge, have even come out saying "The public will be put at potential risk from soy isoflavones in soy protein isolate without adequate warning and information." Soy is particularly problematic for infants, and [soy infant formulas should be avoided](#). It has been estimated that infants who are fed soy formula exclusively receive five birth control pills worth of estrogen every day.

There are some redeeming qualities to soy, however these are found primarily in fermented soy products like tempeh, miso and natto and soybean sprouts. If you want to get some health benefits from soy, stick to these four forms and pass up the processed soy milks, soy 'burgers', soy 'ice cream', soy 'cheese', and the myriad of other soy junk foods that are so readily disguised as health foods.