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Proven and proposed health benefits of soyfoods

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Soyfoods have been intensely investigated over the past 30 years. There is substantial evidence suggesting that independent of nutrient contribution, soyfoods reduce the risk of several chronic diseases. Much of the reason soyfoods have been the focus of so much attention is because they are uniquely-rich sources of isoflavones. Isoflavones are diphenolic molecules that are commonly classified as phytoestrogens but are arguably more accurately classified as selective estrogen receptor modulators. Isoflavones have been posited to reduce risk of breast and prostate cancer, coronary heart disease and osteoporosis and have been shown to alleviate menopausal symptoms. Emerging research suggests that isoflavones may also function as anti-depressants and improve skin health. The protein in soyfoods has also been the subject of much investigation. In addition to being of high quality, soy protein lowers blood cholesterol levels and possibly also blood pressure. Unlike other legumes, soybeans are quite high in fat. The fatty acid profile of soybean oil is very heart healthy as it is low in saturated fatty acids and high in polyunsaturated fatty acids. Soybean oil and full-fat soyfoods are some of the only foods to provide ample amounts of both essential fatty acids. Finally, despite the many proven and proposed benefits of soyfoods, these foods are not without controversy as there is concern, primarily because they are such rich sources of isoflavones, that they may exert untoward effects in some individuals. Concerns include male feminization, worsening the prognosis of breast cancer patients and infertility. However, these concerns are based largely on animal data whereas the human data show soyfoods have an excellent safety profile. The totality of the scientific data indicates that soyfoods can make an important contribution to healthy diets.