

MAKING GOOD CHOICES

James H. Carraway, M.D.
Eastern Virginia Medical School

Everyone has been told over and over again that we can stay healthy by making the best choices in our food selections and with our supplements. Combine that with exercise, stress resolution, and preventive medicine and you have the receipt for healthier and longer life. The problem is, we are often deluded by some of the information that comes down to us which is constantly being perpetuated by the food industry, the government, special diet advocates, and many other groups who are working to get your hard-earned dollars. One of the byproducts of this is a mindset that tells us that if a little bit of a particular food or supplement is good for you, then a lot of it must be better. However, as you will see, this is not necessarily true.

Over the past years there are some outstanding examples of market consumers (that's you) being shaped by advertising. Consider the "low fat" foods which number in the thousands of products and which are still advertised as good for weight loss and healthy and which have been primarily responsible for the increase in weight gain in our culture over the past ten years. After all, if you process fat out of a food product and want to sell it cheaply, more carbs (not protein which is more expensive) can be added. More carbs and less fat increases rapid digestion and puts more sugar and insulin in your system, causing increased weight gain. When this began to be recognized by the public, the food industry started to market "low-carb" foods, which also have their problems in terms of balancing your intake of carbs, protein, and fat. But these products sell, and you are continually reminded of how "healthy" they are. Say it enough times and it begins to be true or at least accepted as such. Margarine (hydrogenated soy or corn oil) was sold as a healthy alternative to butter but has contributed to heart disease and cancer for the past 60-70 years. At the turn of the 20th century, the new foods were polished rice and "enriched" white flour, both of which were and are not healthy products and actually caused a lot of health problems then and excess weight gain now, but which are still being sold in great quantities around the world. Now we are being sold on the widely marketed products called "whole grains," but with just the addition of a small quantity of these can allow a manufacturer to advertise them as such. The whole point is a processed food can be advertised as anything such as healthy or whole grain, even if it is not!

Now let's turn our attention to the new list of "healthy" foods being touted by the food industry, including soy products, dairy milk (Do you have a white mustache yet?), and megavitamins. Speaking of healthy dairy foods, I read an interesting article in *Science News* which linked dairy sugar to ovarian cancer. The article noted the scientific aspects of lactose (milk sugar) and galactose, which requires an enzyme transferase to aid in the breakdown of these sugars. The article stated that Harvard researchers reported in the British journal *Lancet* that eating yogurt on a weekly basis can increase the risk of ovarian cancer by twice as much. Eating cottage cheese also increased that risk. Everyone today has been told that yogurt is a healthy food, and many of the people I know eat it once or even twice a day. It is also processed so that it is "low-fat" and filled with sugars, starch, and artificial sweeteners. The point here is that if a healthy choice is to be made, maybe non-processed yogurt on a less frequent basis may be the healthiest choice.

When you do eat these and other processed foods, the label “natural” or “low-sugar” may simply mean that corn starch and high fructose corn syrup have been added to enhance the flavor. Both are frequently used and help explain the high incidence of Type II diabetes mellitus, now seen much more frequently in children and adults. When I went to medical school, there was no Type II diabetes in children, and the incidence of associated obesity was less than 5%, far different from what it is today. We also know that heart disease is caused by increased (bad) carbohydrate choices as well as hydrogenated fat (vegetable oil), both of which cause the HDL to go down and the unhealthy LDL to rise.

Now let’s discuss another widely marketed health food which we all know as soy. What is it anyway? The history of the soybean is well known by anyone who reads food history. It was noted in Chinese writings 4,000 years ago as a plant that was used to improve the land for the next year’s crop. The reason for this is the same reason that it is used for a food product – it contains nitrogen which is used to make protein (as well as fertilizer!). It was only used as a food in China around 1000 BC, when it began to be fermented into soy paste, miso, tempeh, and natto as well as fermented bean curd.

The soybean is the only plant source containing a “complete” protein, which is the basis of growth, body tissues, and an even life. No other dominant food source such as wheat, rye, oats, or rice has this complete protein. As you have noted, in this country soy has become the “new” health food. However, this may not be as “slam-dunk” as the food industry might lead us to believe. We have gone from vegetable oil to low-fat to low-carb to natural and now to soy foods, all of which promised far more than they can deliver.

Yes, soy is a complete protein, and the consumption of soy in the Orient has been responsible for allowing a great increase in the population. Population growth cannot occur unless there is about 10-12% of complete protein in the diet. Remember that vegetarians have to combine grains, beans, nuts, and vegetables to obtain enough amino acids to make complete proteins. But with the new wave of soy products, this is no longer the case.

The question here is whether soy is a healthy protein for most of us. Compared to egg white, meat or fish protein, or dairy products, it is really not as healthy. There are no nutrients in soy protein as there are in the other protein sources noted. Also, soy protein is a known anti-nutrient, which makes it a less desirable protein than meat, dairy, or eggs. The high phytate content of soy decreases the uptake of zinc, iron, B12, D, calcium, and magnesium. It contains a trypsin inhibitor which interferes with protein digestion and stimulates increased cholecystokinin which in turn increases pancreatic growth and may increase the risk for pancreatic cancer. It does not reduce bone loss after menopause, and the estrogen effect increases body fat in men and women. Muscle builders will not eat soy because it diminishes muscle and because the estrogen effect overrides the testosterone effect. In larger quantities it may reduce the sex drive in men and women. It can increase brain aging and the risk of Alzheimer’s disease if tofu is eaten more than two times per week.

From 2002 to 2007, 2,700 new “healthy” soy foods have been introduced, and the food industry has added \$4 billion each year to their revenue (and still growing). Eighty-five percent of people in this country consider soy healthy, and 33% eat or drink soy-based foods and beverages. That is very effective marketing.

Megavitamins are another group of products we have been taught to believe is good, but there is another side to even that. What we see is that advertising does not always tell us the real facts, that we are sometimes gullible, and that the real truth may be difficult to find. Going back to the basics, the more processed it is, generally the least healthy it is. Meat,

eggs, nuts, grains, vegetables, fruits, nut oils and olive oil all in the right proportion is the healthy way to go.