

Soyfoods and their impact on prostate cancer: current thinking

ENSA Scientific Advisory Committee Position Paper

Introduction

The prostate is a small gland, about the size of a walnut, situated just below the bladder. It is part of the male reproductive system and is responsible for making prostatic fluids that help nourish and protect the sperm.

Prostate cancer is a disease that often remains undiagnosed in men because of the lack of symptoms. However for some, the cancer can grow quickly and spread to other parts of the body. It is not entirely clear why some men develop prostate cancer and others don't; however, it is known that genetic and environmental factors play a role in the development of this disease. Although some of these risk factors can't be changed, such as getting older and having a family history of prostate cancer, others can be altered. Adopting a healthy lifestyle and making positive dietary choices can all help towards protecting against prostate cancer.



Geographical Differences

Prostate cancer is the second most common male cancer in the world and in Europe it ranks first for male cancer deaths. However, men living in East Asian countries, such as Japan and China, have lower rates of prostate cancer compared to men living in Western countries. Although genetics may account for some of these differences, researchers believe that the traditional Asian diet and lifestyle are the primary reasons for the low Asian prostate cancer rates.

This view is supported by the increasing prostate cancer rates in Asia as more men adopt a Western diet and lifestyle. Furthermore, prostate cancer rates are much higher in men who have migrated from Japan to the United States and other high-risk countries. This demonstrates that genetics are not the primary reason for the large worldwide variations in cancer rates.

Since prostate cancer is typically diagnosed at an older age and prostate tumors are generally slow growing, even modestly delaying the onset and/or slowing the growth of these tumors may dramatically reduce the number of prostate cancer deaths.

Effect of soya on prostate cancer

It has been suggested that the low rates of prostate cancer in Asian men may be due to the inclusion of soyfoods in their traditional diet. In fact, studies investigating this possibility have found that men who regularly eat soyfoods have a 30% lower risk of prostate cancer compared to men who eat soyfoods infrequently. In these studies, men with the lowest risk consumed about two servings of soyfoods per day.

As well as reducing the risk for prostate cancer, soya may be beneficial for men who have this disease. Studies have found that soy favorably affects prostate specific antigen (PSA) levels in prostate cancer patients. PSA is a protein produced by the prostate gland that is used as an indicator of prostate cancer.

Studies indicate that in prostate cancer patients who have been unsuccessfully treated for their disease, eating about three servings of soyfoods daily slows the rise in PSA levels. Although the exact mechanisms of action are not known, scientists believe that isoflavones, naturally occurring compounds in soya, may be the key to the ability of soyfoods to reduce prostate cancer risk.

Conclusions

Diet and other lifestyle factors play a role in the development of prostate cancer.

Studies in Asian populations indicate that men who eat higher amounts of soyfoods are at a lower risk of prostate cancer than men who eat relatively little soya.

Soyfoods and soy isoflavones may also be beneficial in men with prostate cancer. Soya may help to inhibit the progression of prostate cancer from an early stage to a more advanced stage.

Although more research is needed before definitive conclusions can be made, the existing evidence indicates that men concerned about prostate health should consider making soyfoods a regular part of their overall healthful diet.

Key Points

Prostate cancer is the second most common male cancer in the world

Western men have higher rates of prostate cancer than men living in East Asian countries such as Japan and China

Diet and other lifestyle factors play a role in the development of prostate cancer

Plant-based diets may have an important role in reducing the risk of cancer overall and eating soyfoods may help to offer protection against prostate cancer

Men concerned about prostate health should consider eating soyfoods daily as part of a healthy, balanced diet

About ENSA

Established in January 2003, the ENSA represents the interests of natural soyfood manufacturers in Europe. The term “natural” refers to the production process used by ENSA members to produce food using whole soybeans. Soy food products from ENSA members are produced without any use of GM (genetically modified) material or GM beans.

ENSA is an association of internationally operating companies, ranging from large corporations to small, family-owned businesses with an annual turnover of €0.8 billion. Since its establishment in 2003, ENSA has been raising awareness about the role of soy and a plant-based diet in moving towards more sustainable food production and consumption patterns.

For more information about ENSA, please visit www.ensa-eu.org or contact the Secretariat.

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