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Recent Research

There have been some interesting studies recently published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* (JAMA); soy intake, vitamin B6, and exercise for weight loss are the topics. Here's a summary of the studies and my take on each one.

Soy Intake and Breast Cancer

I probably get more questions about soy than any other food. A preponderance of Internet gurus say soy is hazardous to health because of the estrogenic properties of soy phytonutrients called isoflavones. Worse is the number of healthcare professionals who advise women that they must avoid soy because it may contribute to estrogen-positive breast cancer. There's no real evidence of that, but it's a prevailing thought. I hope this study will help reduce that fear.

In a study published in December 2009, researchers examined the effect of soy and soy isoflavone intake on over 5,000 breast cancer survivors (1). The Shanghai Breast Cancer Survival Study looked at the relationship between soy intake and breast cancer survival and reoccurrence. The data were clear: as soy intake increased, the rate of mortality and reoccurrence of breast cancer decreased. The same was true for intake of soy isoflavone. What was most interesting was that the relationship held true whether the women had estrogen-negative or estrogen-positive breast cancer.

There's no such thing as the definitive study, but this study strongly suggests that soy intake does not negatively affect the reoccurrence of breast cancer. This study doesn't address the issue of prevention. I think it does support what I've always told women who were concerned about soy: don't go out of your way to eat soy and don't obsess about what might be found in the foods you eat. Eat more vegetables and fruit, and don't worry about soy.

Vitamin B6 and Colorectal Cancer

For those of you who regularly read what I write, you know I'm not a fan of meta-analyses. Too often, studies are combined that use different research methods, leading to suspect conclusions. I say that because in a study recently published in JAMA, researchers examined studies on vitamin B6 intake and serum levels to see if there was a relationship with colorectal cancer (2). Too many statistical manipulations can alter the output, but in this case, there are a couple of things that seem clear.

First, every study included in the meta-analysis showed that as serum levels of vitamin B6 increased, the risk of colorectal cancer decreased. Not just in some of the studies—in every one of the four that were included. That's a powerful observation.

Second, while the relationship between vitamin B6 intake from foods versus supplements was less clear, most studies showed that higher intakes of vitamin B6 were associated with a decreased risk of colorectal cancer. The researchers explained that a single study contributed to the lack of statistical significance, an outlier if you please; still, they did not change their conclusions. They stuck to the statistics and that's to their credit.

Stating the obvious, if vitamin B6 intake were not higher, serum levels of B6 wouldn't be either. Researchers didn't look at that, but it seems like a reasonable observation. Because vitamin B6 is so strongly involved in the production of energy in the body, increasing intake seems like a reasonable thing to do. The RDA is set at 1.5 mg per day on average. Cereals are the most popular source of B6 from foods. Using supplements and energy drinks are an alternative source to increase B6 intake.

Exercise and Body Weight

The next study from JAMA got a lot of press but only in what seemed like a negative way (3). The headlines suggested that unless women exercise an hour a day, they would gain weight. If they were already overweight, well, just forget it because you're destined to be fat. Incredible.

The study examined the exercise habits and body weight of women subjects in the Women's Health Initiative. The researchers found that women who exercised at least an hour a day prevented weight gain over 13 years. The problem is that it only applied to women who began with a normal BMI. If you were overweight or obese, it didn't matter how much you exercised. Doesn't that just make you want to go out for a jog?

Let me give you my analysis. The researchers showed a graph of body weight over time from each group: sedentary, moderate exercise, and those who exercised an hour a day or more. The data are clear. Those who exercised more weighed less to begin with. However, you could superimpose the graphs over the top of each other and see no difference. If you can't visualize that, what I mean is that every group gained the same amount of weight over 13 years—about six pounds. The difference was that the highest-activity group started at a much lower weight than the sedentary group.

Exercise by itself is not a great way to lose weight; if you won't control your appetite, you'll always be heavy. I'm a perfect example of that—I have no problem with exercise, but controlling my appetite has always been a problem. What this study tells us is that if you'll get your body weight to normal by any means necessary, exercise will help you stay there—because when you look at the dietary intake, all three groups ate the same number of calories per day.

The Bottom Line

These studies provide a snapshot of the lifestyle that can help us be healthier:

- We don't have to be afraid of any food.
- We should get adequate amounts of vitamins and other nutrients.
- We have to move our bodies every day.
- And we have to do whatever it takes to get to a normal body weight.

What are you waiting for? In other words:

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. JAMA. 2009;302(22):2437-2443.
2. JAMA. 2010;303(11):1077-1083.
3. JAMA. 2010;303(12):1173-1179.

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