

Take a Closer Look ...

at the good news about soy

As is the case with many dietary subjects, there are conflicting opinions about soy products. In fact, the soy discussion continues to engage researchers, journalists, and nutritionists and other health care professionals, as well as consumers, and the debate shows no signs of subsiding. One point of agreement among objective observers is that soy-based foods are ancient, versatile, potentially healthful food products that are low in fat and high in protein, in fact a completely vegetarian source of high-quality protein. Here is some additional information about soy that we hope consumers will use for educating themselves and others.

What it is...

Soy is an annual low-growing, bushy, leguminous plant (*Glycine max*) from southeast Asia that is extensively cultivated for food, forage, and soil improvement, but especially for its oil-rich seeds. Soybeans are extremely nutritious, containing up to 50% protein and up to 24% carbohydrate. They are also rich in minerals including calcium, iron, and potassium. Soybeans and soybean products contain isoflavones, a subclass of natural plant chemicals called phytoestrogens, molecules similar in structure to natural body estrogens.

For centuries soybeans have been cultivated as a major food source in China. The humble soybean can be made into a remarkably diverse range of food products. Some examples include traditional Eastern foods such as tofu, miso, tempeh, sprouts, and various soy-based sauces, as well as modern products such as meat substitutes, soy cheese, and soy milk.

What it does...

Considered a leading expert on the dietary link between the environment and health, John Robbins has written extensively on this topic. In an article entitled "What About Soy?" John recalls that at one time most Americans con-

sidered soybeans to be "hippie food," if they thought about soybeans at all. But then, he notes, medical research began to accumulate, affirming not only that soy exhibits certain positive health effects but that it also provides an almost ideal substitute for animal protein. The mainstream media began to take notice. John cites as a case in point the 1999 article titled "The Joy of Soy," a thorough examination of the soy controversy in which *Time* magazine announced, among other things, that just 1.5 ounces of soy can have a beneficial effect on cholesterol levels. John's conclusion? "The anti-soy crusade has needlessly frightened many away from a food source that has long been a boon to humankind, a food source that can, if we are respectful of our bodies and of nature, nourish and bless us in countless ways."

What others are saying about it...

Under the banner, "FDA gives thumbs up to soy," the January 2000 issue of *Better Nutrition* magazine reported that foods containing significant amounts of soy protein are now "eligible to bear a health claim stating that soy protein, as part of a diet low in saturated fat and cholesterol, may reduce our risk of developing coronary heart disease." This was on the heels of the March 1999 issue of *Natural*

Health magazine that considered the soy controversy in some detail, reporting both the known pros and the suspected cons of soy protein usage. Acknowledging that the plant estrogens found in soy resemble the natural estrogens found in the human body, the magazine states that "This could be why soy consumption promises relief from menopausal symptoms, among other benefits."

What it all means...

Is soy a miracle food? John Robbins states: "Just as taking vitamins can't atone for a poor diet, taking soy can't make up for a diet that's otherwise high in calories, saturated fat, and junk food. Nor can it compensate for a lack of exercise, or other destructive lifestyle habits."

As in most aspects of life, then, the final word is...balance.

Individuals are encouraged to examine the evidence and then make an educated decision about a nutritional regimen. Many have decided that soy can be a beneficial addition to their overall healthy regimen, and have thus experienced for themselves the good news about soy! ☐

