

**Nutrition for Thriving After Breast Cancer – Q&A**

- **Where can I find helpful information in the future?** For all questions related to food, nutrition, physical activity and cancer, check the American Institute for Cancer Research ([aicr.org](http://aicr.org)). You may also find evidence-based information on the National Cancer Institute website ([cancer.gov](http://cancer.gov)).
- **What are some good omega 3 fatty acid sources to add to your diet rather than supplements if you don't like fish?** Walnuts, pumpkin seeds, flax seed, canola oil and soy foods all contain omega-3 fatty acids.
- **Is dairy OK?** If using dairy foods, it is best to use low fat or fat free versions to keep saturated fat intake low; diets lower in saturated fats are associated with improved breast cancer survivorship.
- **What are your thoughts on Weight Watchers?** This approach can be good for some people, but everyone has different preferences for receiving support. Weight Watchers has a long history of assisting people with weight loss. TOPS (Taking Off Pounds Sensibly) is another similar option. Both are support group based, but may be more of an online or virtual platform currently due to the pandemic.
- **Are vegetarian meat substitutes OK to use since they are highly processed foods?** Yes, in moderation. They can be high in sodium, so review the nutrition information for sodium content (ideally, use foods with <300 mg per serving). Consider using them intermittently and sometimes using beans/lentils in dishes (such as for tacos, shepherd's pie, etc.). Two popular plant-based burgers, Beyond and Impossible, were compared for nutritional value (presence of vitamins, minerals in addition to protein content) and the Impossible burger product was found to have a better nutrient profile.
- **Are there issues with processed sugars increasing insulin and contributing to cancer risk?** Ideally, limit intake of processed sugars as much as possible. Processed sugars contribute additional calories without additional nutrients, and this can contribute to weight gain or difficulty maintaining a healthy weight. High sugar intake can also result in greater circulating insulin levels, which in turn promotes the release of growth factors. These growth factors, should they come into contact with cancerous cells, may promote growth of those cells.
- **Is it OK to use plant-based protein powders?** Using a protein powder can be a way to ensure you are getting enough protein if you are choosing to follow an entirely or mostly plant-based diet. Ideally, you'd include as many whole food forms of protein

as possible (beans, lentils, soy foods). If using plant-based protein powders, use a variety of sources – including pea and grain proteins as well as hemp or soy protein.

- **Do you need B12 supplements if you are following a vegan (strictly plant-based) diet?** If you are not including any animal foods in your diet, you may have trouble getting enough B12. I recommend requesting B12 testing periodically, and you may take a B12 supplement if you are deficient. Because there are other nutrients that may be deficient in a strict plant-based diet, such as zinc, iron, and vitamin D, you may benefit from a basic multi-vitamin with up to 100% of the DRI for all nutrients, and you may need additional vitamin D. Talk with your doctor about testing for vitamin D and B12 if you are following a vegan diet.
- **Can you use coconut milk instead of cow's milk if you are lactose intolerant?** This depends on what form of coconut milk you are using. Canned coconut milk includes all of the coconut cream and can have about 400 calories per cup compared to 120 calories per cup of lowfat milk. All non-dairy milk is lactose-free. There are also coconut based non-dairy milk products that are lower in calories due to removal of much of the coconut cream. Other non-dairy milks include oat milk, hemp milk, rice milk, almond milk and soy milk. However, of these, only soy milk has the same amount of protein as cow's milk in an 8 oz serving.
- **Are diet sodas OK?** These contain phosphates which can contribute to bone loss, so if you use diet soda, do so in moderation. Persons who take Estrogen blocking therapies will already be at risk for bone loss.
- **What is the best way to counteract bone loss from Estrogen blockers?** Ensure that your calcium intake is adequate, that your serum vitamin D is within normal limits (and use a supplement if needed) and get regular resistance exercise. In general, women need 1200 mg of calcium per day in divided doses (so, not more than 500 mg at a time) for best absorption. Current recommendation for vitamin D intake is 800 units per day, but some people have trouble maintaining their vitamin D levels and need more. Talk with your doctor about your serum vitamin D value. If you struggle with resistance exercise or have physical limitations, request a consult with a physical therapist for instruction on how to safely get resistance exercise. If you already have bone loss, do not start exercising without talking to your doctor and/or physical therapist.
- **Is matcha tea OK?** Matcha tea is a form of green tea – where the tea leaves are steamed, dried and then ground into a powder. Green tea contains specific phytochemicals called catechins. These have been studied and may be protective against some cancers, but current research is inconclusive and more research is needed. Importantly, matcha contains caffeine like regular green and other teas and caffeinated beverages should be used in moderation.
- **What about NOOM?** NOOM is a behaviorally based app designed to help people become aware of and change lifestyle habits. I have reviewed a fair amount of its

nutrition information content and found it to be fairly accurate. The app allows you to track fluid intake, steps, exercise and food intake, and also provides education and strategies for making healthy lifestyle changes. Many people have succeeded with this app, but as with other programs, not everyone will connect with and benefit from it.

- **Is tofu OK?** Yes. Tofu is considered a whole soy food (it is minimally processed from the soybean), and evidence suggests soy foods are safe for breast cancer survivors and may reduce risk of breast cancer recurrence.
- **Is soy sauce OK?** There is no evidence that soy sauce is problematic for breast cancer survivors. However, soy sauce is a high sodium seasoning, and in general, the Western (or U.S.) diet is already too high in sodium. Also, people with certain types of heart disease and high blood pressure should limit sodium intake. Current guidelines are to limit daily sodium intake to <2300 mg per day.
- **Is butter OK to use?** Butter fat is primarily saturated fat. Evidence suggests that reducing saturated fat intake may help reduce breast cancer recurrence. High saturated fat intake also increases risk for heart disease, so reducing saturated fat intake is advised. Also, choose fat free or low-fat versions of other dairy products such as yogurt, milk, cheese, etc. There are some plant-based margarines, such as Smart Balance or Earth Balance, that don't contain trans fats (trans fats are also thought to contribute to heart disease). Using these types of margarine in place of butter will reduce your saturated fat intake without adding trans fats. Tip: be sure to look at the label for ingredients that contribute trans fats such as partially hydrogenated oil of any type like canola, soy, corn, etc.
- **Is there any concern about drinking herbal teas, like chamomile? Is phytoestrogen a concern?** At this time, there is no evidence to suggest drinking herbal tea (such as chamomile) is detrimental. Rather, studies have been evaluating whether tea consumption may reduce cancer risk, but to date, they are inconclusive. It is important to understand what the term "phytoestrogen" means. The term "phyto" is Latin for "plant", therefore the name would seem to imply that some plants contain estrogen – but they don't. Estrogen is only produced in mammals. Thus, the term is intended to denote that there are chemical compounds in some plants that are similar (in chemical structure) to estrogens. But these compounds are not the same as estrogens. It is thought that phytoestrogens may be responsible for the cancer protective effects of some foods.
- **Can caffeine be a hormone disrupter?** Hormone disruptors are also known as "endocrine disruptors". Although older studies suggest caffeine may increase insulin and stress hormone production, evidence suggests that caffeine doesn't play a role in the development of several cancers, including breast cancer. In fact, there are studies suggesting that intake of beverages that naturally contain caffeine (such as coffee and tea) may be cancer protective. Studies suggest that caffeine intake of up to 400 mg per day is not associated with increased risk of chronic diseases such as heart

disease. It should be noted that higher daily intakes may be associated with elevated blood pressure, heart rhythm disturbance and sleep disturbance. Note: the answer to this question was updated following the live session based on follow up research.

- **Which plant-based oils are good?** Plant-based oil use is encouraged, especially when used in place of animal fats. Most frequently used oils include olive, canola, avocado, soy, safflower, sesame and peanut oils. Canola and soy oil contain some omega-3 fatty acids. Some oils are better for cooking, like peanut, canola, soy and olive oil, while others may fare better as finishing oils or in homemade salad dressings (avocado, flaxseed oil).