Debunking the Myth That Soy Increases Cervical Cancer Risk

The New York Times' women's health advice columnist says the claim is not true, no matter what your mother says.

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Despite what some may say, scientists have identified no association between soy consumption and an increased risk for cervical cancer. That's according to a response to a reader's concern—more specifically, her mother's—by The New York Times' women's health advice columnist, ob-gyn Jen Gunter, MD.

When "D. from New Mexico" was told by a doctor to obtain a screening for cervical cancer, D.'s mother became hysterical and blamed her daughter's—gasp!—vegetarian diet for putting her at risk for such a malignancy. The mother, it seems, had fallen prey to unsubstantiated claims that eating soy causes cervical cancer.

In response, Gunter turned to the near-exclusive cause of the most common type of cervical cancer, squamous cell carcinoma: the highly common sexually transmitted infection human papillomavirus (HPV). The virus also drives about 70% of the second most common type, adenocarcinoma.

The HPV vaccine Gardasil prevents nine strains of the virus that are associated with cancer. The vaccine is approved for women and men up to age 45. HPV can cause not just cervical cancer but also oral cavity, pharyngeal, vaginal, vulvar, anal and penile cancers. Gardasil lowers the risk of such cancers. Condoms may also lower the risk of HPV transmission.

As for diet's association with cancer risk, Gunter notes a paucity of data on the matter. That said, overall, dietary carotenoids, which are colorful pigments in fruits and vegetables, as well as vitamin C may reduce the risk of cancer. Some research suggests that having low folate levels might increase cancer risk.

Research otherwise suggests that the ultra-processed food and alcohol that pervade the American diet might drive the risk of some cancers, if not cervical cancer specifically.

Gunter doesn't delve into the research on soy and cancer, but it's worth noting that according to the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, eating soy foods is associated with a reduced risk of breast,

prostate and gastric cancers. The institute also emphasizes that foods containing soy are safe for people in treatment for cancer to eat.

Edamame, anyone?

To read the New York Times article, click here.

To read the Dana Farber advice, click here.

To read more about diet and cancer prevention, click here.

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