

Soy Protein Makes a Comeback

Author : SNI

Date : October 2, 2019

By Virginia Messina, RDN -- Once hailed as a matchless plant protein for crafting veggie meats and cheeses, soy protein has lately been pushed aside in favor of trendier options made from peas, nuts, and oats. That may be changing, though. As innovative food companies strive to make better and better plant-based foods, they are turning once again to soy protein.

It's been a bit of an uphill battle for soy. Surveys of consumer food habits find that beans, rice, wheat, quinoa, and potatoes rate as more healthful sources of protein than soyfoods. Vegan protein powders made from peas, rice, and hempseed outsell those made from soy. A 2016 survey by the International Food and Information Council, found that consumers are trying to get more protein from beans, but less from soy. A growing number of products aimed at vegetarians and flexitarians boast that they are "soy-free" on the label.

There are any number of reasons why some consumers have turned their backs on soyfoods, including concerns about health impacts of isoflavones as well as misinformed views on the impact of soybean crops on the environment. Although soy protein is among the eight most common food allergens, it's actually the least likely of these foods to cause allergic reactions in adults.^{1,2} And concerns about soy and cancer have been effectively countered with data on the potential benefits of soy consumption among women with breast cancer.³

But even as apprehensions about soyfoods and health subside, the fact remains that soy is facing competition from new plant proteins for the first time. Soy milk now shares refrigerator space in stores with milk made from almonds, coconut, oats, walnuts, cashews, and flaxseed. Veggie meats are made with everything from lentils to jackfruit.

But while those options provide a range of choices for consumers who want to try something new, food manufacturers are recognizing that when it comes to producing products that function and taste like meat, and that provide comparable nutrition, soy has these benefits.⁴ For 30 years, soy protein has been recognized as the only plant protein comparable in quality to animal protein.⁵⁻⁸

While the wildly popular [*Impossible Burger*](#) was originally soy-free, the company recently released a [new version, featuring soy protein](#). Their focus was on creating a burger that tasted even better than the original, and the early reviews suggest that it does.

Likewise, new competitors to the *Impossible burger* including products from several of the largest food companies in the world both here and abroad, some of which are primarily in the meat business, have opted to use soy protein. While some companies take a low-key approach to their

decision to use soy protein, others are not so shy about it. Launched in 2014, the liquid meal replacement [Soylent](#), is an example of a product that proudly boasts about its soy content.

With its small carbon footprint,⁹ excellent protein quality,¹⁰ and its contribution to flavor and function in meatless products, soy protein is finding favor with some innovative companies developing the next generation of plant-based protein products.

References

1. Verrill L, Bruns R, Luccioli S. Prevalence of self-reported food allergy in U.S. adults: 2001, 2006, and 2010. *Allergy Asthma Proc.* 2015;36(6):458-67.
2. Gupta RS, Warren CM, Smith BM, et al. Prevalence and severity of food allergies among US adults. *JAMA Netw Open.* 2019;2(1):e185630.
3. Chi F, Wu R, Zeng YC, et al. Post-diagnosis soy food intake and breast cancer survival: A meta-analysis of cohort studies. *Asian Pacific J Cancer Prev: APJCP.* 2013;14(4):2407-12.
4. Thrane M, Paulsen PV, Orcutt MW, et al. Soy protein: Impacts, production, and applications. In: Nadathur SR, Wanasundara JPD, Scanlin L, eds. *Sustainable Protein Sources.* United Kingdom: Academic Press; 2017:23-46.
5. Istfan N, Murray E, Janghorbani M, et al. The nutritional value of a soy protein concentrate (STAPRO-3200) for long-term protein nutritional maintenance in young men. *J Nutr.* 1983;113(12):2524-34.
6. Istfan N, Murray E, Janghorbani M, et al. An evaluation of the nutritional value of a soy protein concentrate in young adult men using the short-term N-balance method. *J Nutr.* 1983;113(12):2516-23.
7. Young VR, Puig M, Queiroz E, et al. Evaluation of the protein quality of an isolated soy protein in young men: relative nitrogen requirements and effect of methionine supplementation. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 1984;39(1):16-24.
8. Young VR, Wayler A, Garza C, et al. A long-term metabolic balance study in young men to assess the nutritional quality of an isolated soy protein and beef proteins. *Am J Clin Nutr.* 1984;39(1):8-15.
9. González AD, Frostell B, Carlsson-Kanyama A. Protein efficiency per unit energy and per unit greenhouse gas emissions: Potential contribution of diet choices to climate change mitigation. *Food Policy.* 2011;36:62-70.
10. Hughes GJ, Ryan DJ, Mukherjea R, et al. Protein digestibility-corrected amino acid scores (PDCAAS) for soy protein isolates and concentrate: Criteria for evaluation. *J Agric Food Chemistry.* 2011;59(23):12707-12.