

# I know for a fact...

The myth-busting continues with part three of the VVF's guide for know-it-alls

**T**he safety of soya is a controversial subject that divides people into two distinct camps – those for soya and those against. The *Guardian's* Felicity Lawrence recently set out her stall in a 3,000 word article – very anti. In a much shorter right to reply, the VVF knocked the legs from under her argument. VVF health campaigner, Dr Justine Butler, tears apart the soya scare stories... and demolished the idea that the blood group diet has any scientific basis – well you deserve a laugh, it's nearly Christmas!

## Soya disrupts thyroid function

For the vast majority of people, soya does not disrupt thyroid function. If you're basically healthy, your thyroid is functioning properly and you get enough iodine in your diet, you are extremely unlikely to be affected.

The thyroid is a small gland found in the front of the neck which produces a hormone called thyroxine, which helps to control how fast the body makes and uses energy from food. The thyroid gland needs iodine to make thyroxine and a lack of iodine can cause it to enlarge, forming a goitre.

The concerns about soya and thyroid are based on two issues – the presence of goitrogens and soya isoflavones or plant hormones.

Goitrogens occur naturally in soya, broccoli, kale, cabbage, turnips, millet, peanuts and pine nuts and can interfere with the uptake of iodine, which in turn can lead to the formation of a goitre. This only becomes a problem if the diet fails to provide enough iodine.

How soya isoflavones act on the thyroid – if at all – isn't clear. A recent review of 14 studies found that there was little evidence that soya foods or their isoflavones adversely affect thyroid function in healthy people whose diets contain enough iodine.

As a precautionary measure, health practitioners are warned that people whose thyroid isn't fully functional, and/or whose iodine intake is marginal, may require higher doses of thyroid medication and that soya foods may predispose these susceptible individuals to hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid).

Given the lack of clinical evidence, these concerns are mostly theoretical but the general consensus is that everyone, soya consumers or not, should ensure they get an adequate intake of iodine. One of the simplest ways is to use iodised salt.

The government recommends 140 micrograms of iodine per day for adults and good sources include seaweed such as

norikelp and Vecon vegetable stock. Iodine can also be found in cereals and grains but levels vary depending on the amount of iodine in the soil.

Too much iodine can be harmful and the Food Standards Agency reckon that 500 micrograms or less a day is unlikely to cause harm.

## Processed soya foods are bad for you

Generally speaking, the more processed a food becomes the less nutritional value it has. For example, there are significantly less fibre, vitamins and minerals in white bread than wholemeal bread. It's also true that traditional Asian soya foods such as tofu, miso, tempeh, soya sauce, tamari and soya milk, made using fermentation or precipitation methods, contain a wider range of nutrients than modern soya protein isolates such as textured vegetable protein (TVP) used in mock meats.

The soya antis claim that Western soya products are so highly-processed that they lose valuable nutrients and the plant hormone content (isoflavones) may be increased.

The truth is that 'mock meats' still provide a valuable, low-fat and cholesterol-free source of good protein and so remain a healthier option than their meaty equivalents, which contain saturated animal fat, animal protein and cholesterol. Animal products are also a source of hormones such as oestrogen and animal hormones are far more potent than plant hormones, having been linked to certain cancers.

Despite this, the VVF do not recommend the excessive consumption of highly-processed foods of any kind – soya or not – as they tend to contain high levels of fat, often including hydrogenated fat, salt, sugar and artificial additives. The key to good health is to eat a wide range of foods, including plenty of whole grains such as wholemeal bread, brown pasta and brown rice, pulses such as peas, beans and lentils, fruit and vegetables, nuts and seeds.

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# i know for a fact (continued)

## Blood group gobbledygook

If you follow a diet that suits your blood group you'll feel better, lose weight and lower your risk of many diseases – or so the theory goes. Adherents reckon that your blood group determines how your body deals with different nutrients and by following a diet specifically designed for your blood type, your body digests and absorbs food more efficiently and this, apparently, can help with weight loss.

So what foods suit your blood type? Here's where the theory gets really weird and wonderful. The claim is that human's different blood types evolved at different times throughout our evolution and that we should eat a diet similar to the types of foods our ancestors ate at the time their particular blood group evolved.

Blood group O people supposedly evolved from hunter-gatherers and they should therefore follow a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet with lots of meat and fish but no dairy products, wheat or grains. They should exercise by running around like their ancestors in pursuit of prey.

Type A people are more suited to a plant-based vegetarian diet made up of nuts, seeds, beans, grains, fruit and vegetables. They should take calm exercise like golf or yoga to reflect the lifestyle of their farming ancestors.

Those with type B can eat a varied diet consisting of meat, dairy, grains and vegetables. Their ancestors, apparently, were travellers and they should do activities like hiking and swimming.

Finally, those with type AB should follow a plant-based diet most of the time with some meat, fish and dairy products occasionally and should combine calming exercises with moderately intense activities.

So what do the experts say? Medical opinion is unusually unanimous – the whole theory is complete nonsense! Historical evidence shows that all blood types had developed before the introduction of agriculture and all had all lived through the hunter-gatherer period and so had all been subjected to the same influences.

The main effect of this diet, of course, is to scare people into avoiding many nutritious foods which are essential for a healthy life. Consequently you won't find a qualified nutritionist recommending it.

The blood group diet is based on science – science fiction. If it had any validity then we should be about due for a new blood group to evolve that reflects today's lifestyle. People with blood group X will need to eat plenty of pizzas, burgers, chips, doughnuts and fizzy drinks and exercise by reaching for the remote control!



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