

Soy what? I'll Tofu!

A Guide to Soy Foods

By Suzanne DalLago, RN, CPT, CN

Soy is one of the best sources of protein around. Why? First, it has all the essential amino acids as animal protein does and second, it contains zero cholesterol and saturated fat because it doesn't come from an animal – it comes from a plant. Soy is also rich in essential fatty acids (the good kind), magnesium and B vitamins, like folic acid.

I first encountered soy at the grocery store years ago and couldn't help but wonder why anyone would buy that 'stuff' that looked like a curd of white mush – what was "tofu" anyway? It wasn't until I started looking for alternative protein sources to meat that I came to understand how valuable soy is. Ultimately, I became a vegetarian and realized the many benefits of 'white mush'.

Numerous studies have shown that just 25 grams of soy protein each day may reduce your risk of heart disease, certain cancers, improve bone health and ease menopausal symptoms. With the help of soy, I sailed through menopause. (Was that too much information to share?)

Soybeans can be eaten whole after being boiled or roasted, but most soybeans are transformed into a great variety of foods. Below is a list of the most common forms of soy foods, including tips and ideas for preparation and storage.

Tofu A soft or firm, cheese like food made by curdling fresh hot soymilk with a coagulant. Tofu is a bland product with no taste and absorbs the flavors of other ingredients with which it is cooked. (I recommend the extra firm or firm brand for cooking and the silken variety when making smoothies, desserts and dips.) Cooking with Tofu is made easier by reducing the water content; to do so, place Tofu between paper towels and a heavy pot, or some other weighted object on top of it to release the water. Alternatively, Nasoya sells super firm cubed Tofu which is easier to drain.

Leftover Tofu refrigerated in water will last about seven days, supposedly if you change the water daily. (I always forget to do this and it holds up just fine.) You can also freeze Tofu for months, but be prepared for the consistency to change due to the water content in it. When thawed, Tofu will look like a yellow, chewy sponge, however in this state it is sometimes easier to work with because it easily crumbles and dices. Tofu can also be sliced, breaded, and fried like a cutlet. Thawed Tofu also soaks up marinades well yet remains firm enough to cook and skewer on the grill.

Use Tofu in salads, stir-fries, soups and as a substitute in recipes such as ricotta cheese in vegetable lasagna. Marjon Grilled Tofu is ready to eat hot or cold and can be used on sandwiches. It has 56 calories, 3 grams fat, 0 cholesterol or trans fat, 2 Carbs and 7 grams protein. Try mashing Tofu with a hard boiled egg in lieu of using mayo and try doing the same with tuna for lots of protein, healthy fat and complex carbs which will keep you feeling fuller longer and help keep blood sugar stable. Also try marinating Tofu with fat free Italian dressing and baking it at 350-400 degrees for about 30 minutes.

Tempeh Tempeh is a chunky, tender soybean cake made when whole soybeans are mixed with a grain(s) and fermented. I like the texture better than tofu and use this in place of hamburger in my chili, spaghetti sauces, and sloppy joes. You can find Tempeh in the freezer section, one of my favorite brands is Lightlife Organic Three Grain.

To prepare, defrost in the fridge or microwave and use a pair of kitchen shears to cut into strips before frying or into small pieces for recipes as needed. For added flavor, try cooking Tempeh first with onions and garlic.

Edamame Edamame are young soybeans which make great snacks and side dishes; they are high in protein and fiber and contain no cholesterol. Sold frozen in the pod or shelled, Edamame has become increasingly visible at major grocery chains in recent years.

Soynuts Soynuts are whole soybeans that have been soaked in water and baked until browned. They come in a variety of flavors and taste similar to peanuts. A healthy alternative snack and salad topping, keep an eye on portion size because they are high in calories like traditional nuts.

Soymilk When soybeans are soaked, ground fine and strained to produce a fluid, the result is soybean milk. Sold off the shelves in aseptic containers and in the dairy section, Soymilk comes in a variety of flavors – make sure you buy Soymilk and not a soy drink.

Some brands to consider: West Soy Non Fat Vanilla has 80 calories in a cup, 12 carbs and 6 grams of protein; the plain version has 10 less calories in a cup and only 10 carbs. 8th Continent Soymilk tastes great, but is not made with organic soybeans if that is important to you. My husband's preferred choice is the Silk Chocolate brand which he likes to drink after a workout. Soymilk is normally fortified with calcium and Vitamin D; it is also a great source of protein and "good" carbs.

Try using Soymilk to make oatmeal and with other cereals, as well as a replacement in coffee and tea. Plain Soymilk works great for creaming soups and vegetables or as a substitute in desserts for cream.

Miso Miso is a condiment that has a salty taste and is commonly used in Japanese cooking for Miso soup and as a flavor enhancement in a variety of foods. Made from soybeans and grains, Miso is quick and easy to use with very few calories. I use it to flavor vegetable stock and soups with tofu and veggies.

Soy Sauce Soy Sauce is produced when soybeans are put through a fermenting process.

The downside to using Soy Sauce is the sodium count: just one tablespoon has 1,005 mg. – almost half the DRA for sodium. (Think twice the next time you go out for Chinese!)

Comparatively, the same amount of sodium is found in a 1/2 teaspoon of table salt. Low Sodium, has half that count – still a lot if you are watching sodium intake. Make sure to buy reduced-sodium and low-sodium brands of Soy Sauce; "light" doesn't necessarily mean low in sodium.



Soy Cheese Soy Cheese is made from soymilk and is usually found in the produce section by way of individually wrapped slices, in shredded varieties and chunks – great for pizzas and sandwiches. Soy cheese has no cholesterol or saturated fat and usually has less calories than regular cheese; it is also a great option for people who are lactose intolerant.

Soy Yogurt Made from soymilk, Soy Yogurt can also be used as a substitute for sour cream and cream cheese. Two of my favorite brands are: O'Soy from Stonyfield Farm, which has 100 calories per a 6 oz. cup with 15 carbs and 5 grams of protein, and Silk Vanilla Soy with 140 calories per 6 oz., 25 carbs and 2.5 grams of fat.

Soy Burgers & Crumbles Soy Burgers and Crumbles are a great meat alternative to ground beef burgers and browned ground beef used in cooking. Use Crumbles in tacos, stroganoff, pizza, stuffed peppers, soups, casseroles and like recipes. (My kids never could taste the difference, honestly!)

There are numerous flavors and brands to choose from today, Boca Crumbles, Lightlife Smart Ground and Gardenburger are the most well known. I personally love Gardenburger's Veggie Medley, a patty blend of delicious vegetables and grains with broccoli, rolled oats, savory onions, red and yellow bell peppers, crisp carrots, brown rice and water chestnuts. One of the absolutely best habits to get into is bringing your own soy burgers to a BBQ. When you add pickles, lettuce, tomatoes, soy cheese, condiments and the like, there is little difference in taste between regular and soy burgers. Add to that the fact that soy burgers have a lot less calories with zero fat and cholesterol, and there is absolutely no reason for not making soy burgers part of your normal dietary regime.

Don't let flavor or texture fears get in the way of trying soy foods. If you're hesitant to shop soy, try some at a restaurant first; Tofu and Tempeh are common menu items of Chinese, Asian and Thai cuisines. Other restaurants to try: Chow Patti in Arlington Heights, Blind Faith in Evanston and the Chicago Diner on Halsted – all known for great vegetarian dishes.

Its time to rattle your comfort zone and enjoy some soy!

Suzanne DalLago specializes in weight loss and weight control, with a focus on emotional eating and achieving lifestyle change. She does not advocate diets, fasting, measuring, buying special foods or any other short-term minded weight loss strategies. To request a consultation email Suzanne at: Suzanne0812@aol.com or call: 630-543-4655. -CWM

Suzanne's Ultimate Soy Smoothie

1 Cup fat free Vanilla Soymilk
1/2 Cup Silken Tofu, soft or firm
Fresh or Frozen Fruit: strawberries, blueberries, etc.
1 Banana, fresh, frozen or overly ripe (great use for black bananas)

Blend until smooth. Add Wheat Germ and/or Flax Seed, if desired.
For additional protein, add soy protein powder.

Timesaving Tip: Combine ingredients and chill un-blended overnight.
Blend before serving the next morning for a quick nourishing breakfast.

