

An Excerpt from *"In Concert Against Cancer"*

By Willow Older

Red Clover: Better Than Soy?

Women seeking natural alternatives to hormone replacement therapy for relief of hot flashes, vaginal dryness, and other symptoms of menopause are turning more and more to phytoestrogens. Studies suggest that soy and other foods and herbs rich in these plant-based compounds may allay symptoms of menopause and perimenopause, prevent osteoporosis, and perhaps even lower the risk of breast and endometrial cancers. "For a significant group of women this is a good alternative," says Charles Debrovner, M.D., an obstetrician and gynecologist in New York City. "Phytoestrogens can protect breasts, relieve hot flashes, and help vaginal lubrication, all without the downside of estrogen." Men may benefit, too. Preliminary studies suggest that phytoestrogens may lower cholesterol and possibly prevent the development of prostate cancer.

Lucky clover

One phytoestrogen product that Dr. Debrovner recommends to many of his patients is red clover, a legume in the same plant family as soy. Most of the studies on red clover have been sponsored by Novogen, a company that produces a red clover product called Promensil. The first U.S. study of Promensil was recently completed at Tufts University in Boston. In the uncontrolled pilot study, 16 patients with menopausal symptoms took Promensil daily for two to three months. After eight weeks, patients reported a 56% decrease in the mean number of hot flashes, as well as a decrease in the intensity of hot flashes and night sweats. The researchers concluded that Promensil is probably not as effective as estrogen but appears to be safe, producing no adverse effects.

Tori Hudson, N.D., of the National College of Naturopathic Medicine in Oregon, believes that red clover products such as Promensil are promising but that further research is needed. She notes that two other studies of the supplement showed no benefit, although a third study indicated promise for reducing the risk of heart disease in postmenopausal women who took the herb.

A bounty of phytoestrogens

The jury is still out on all the potential benefits of phytoestrogens and the best way to get them. Phytoestrogens come in many forms. The most potent are compounds called isoflavones, which are found in high concentrations in legumes, especially soy, as well as in red clover and other herbs. Why red clover? Soy contains a variety of isoflavones, including two potent ones called genistein and daidzein. But red clover, in comparison, has two additional ones called formononetin and biochanin. Red clover also contains flavonoid compounds called coumestans, which some studies suggest have six times more estrogenlike activity than most isoflavones.

People in some 33 cultures use red clover to treat a range of ailments, including chest congestion, gout, eczema, psoriasis, swollen glands, and even venereal diseases such as syphilis. Though we wouldn't recommend red clover for all these complaints, it may be worth a try for symptoms of menopause.