The Fiber/Breast Cancer Connection

Most of the publicity concerning fiber relates to its connection in reducing the risk of colon cancer and heart disease. New research, however, indicates fiber can also reduce the risks of breast cancer.

According to B. A. Stoll, M.D., writing in the British Journal of Cancer, fiber offers several protective mechanisms. First, it reduces the flow of excess estrogen through the liver by flushing estrogen out through the colon. Secondly, many of the fruits and vegetables containing fiber also contain isoflavones and lignans. Those compounds are converted into substances which fill in the binding sites normally taken by estrogen. That process apparently reduces the risk of estrogen-sensitive cancers such as breast cancer. A third factor is fiber's seeming ability to improve insulin sensitivity, which also reduces estrogen levels.

Sometimes the cancer prevention powers of fiber are credited to a reduction in fat intake. (Reduced fat consumption is often associated with increased fiber intake.) But evidence from Finland points to the possibility that fiber might be protective all by itself.

On average, Finlanders consume higher levels of both fats and fiber than do residents of the U.S. or England. But Finlander women have a much lower mortality rate from breast cancer than their counterparts in either the U.S. or England.

A study published in Cancer and Nutrition, comparing over 700 Uruguayan women, also found higher fiber consumption significantly reduced breast cancer risks. In that study, the fat consumption factor was statistically eliminated, thereby helping to confirm the benefits of dietary fiber.

A study out of the Harvard School of Public Health also supports the breast protective factor of fiber intake. In particular, postmenopausal women were taking estrogen appeared to be at lower risk for breast cancer if they ate at least five servings of fruits and vegetables each day. The ability of fiber products to eliminate the excess estrogen may have played a role, thereby reducing breast cancer risks