Herbal supplements with estrogen-like compounds may be associated with reduction in postmenopausal breast cancer risk

Findings from a groundbreaking, but preliminary, study in Ontario suggest that women who took supplements containing estrogen-like compounds called isoflavones at any point in their life had reduced postmenopausal breast cancer risk compared to women who never took these supplements.\(^1\)

Isoflavones are found in particularly high amounts in red clover or soy supplements, and in smaller amounts in others, such as evening primrose or wild yam.\(^2\) Although many of these supplements are used for hormone-related issues, such as premenstrual or menopausal symptoms, they are also promoted for other health reasons.\(^3\)–\(^5\) The long-term effects of supplement use, including those related to breast cancer, are not clear.

To begin to understand the potential effects of isoflavone supplements, researchers matched 3,101 Ontario women aged 25–74 who had been diagnosed with breast cancer with 3,471 controls (women without breast cancer). Study participants filled out questionnaires about their background, lifestyle, medical and reproductive history, as well as use of 28 herbal supplements containing isoflavones.

Postmenopausal breast cancer risk was reduced by more than 30% among women who had used three or more isoflavone supplements over their lifetime or any isoflavone supplement longer than five years. When these women included at least one supplement with high isoflavone ingredients (such as red clover or soy), their breast cancer risk was reduced by approximately half.
Although these findings are novel and interesting, it is important to caution women against changing their supplement use based on results from a single study. Further research is needed to investigate these findings in different types of studies and larger populations.

References