A clear, consistent message is needed on the benefits or risks of eating soy, reports a study of soy consumption amongst women at risk of developing breast cancer.

For the study published in the October issue of the Journal of the American Dietetic Association, researchers from the Fox Chase Cancer Center sent out a soy consumption self-assessment questionnaire to 893 women who were enrolled in a Family Risk Assessment Program. All of the women were first- and second-degree relatives of cancer patients, and deemed to have a greater risk of developing the disease themselves.

Of the 452 respondents, 145 (32 percent) were classified as soy consumers, for the year preceding the study. Of these, 45 percent reported a reduction in cancer risk as a reason for their consumption.

Twenty-two of the non-soy eaters (7 percent) said they avoided soy because of a potential association between the phytoestrogens in soy foods and breast cancer.


However others have suggested that high levels of intake might actually increase breast cancer risk in US women, especially amongst those already considered to be at risk.

Most of the respondents said that they had sought out information about soy from friends, magazines, newspapers and health newsletters, but few reported obtaining information from health professionals.

"Health professionals should take an active role in communicating and clarifying such information to patients, consumers, and public information/media channels," wrote the study authors.

The only FDA-approved claim relating to soy is the 1999 unqualified health claim linking consumption of soy foods to a reduced risk of coronary heart disease. According to a 2000 report in FDA Consumer, consumption of soy foods increased 20 percent per year since 1995 and the approval of this claim led to surging interest.

But the clear, consistent message on cancer that the authors call for slipped further into the distance yesterday, when The Solae Company announced that it has temporarily withdrawn its qualified health claim petition on the soy/cancer risk reduction link.

Solae said that it still believes the science supports the claim, but that it wants to make some improvements to its claim in the light of recent decisions that have been handed down.