Soy has long held a prominent place in the vegetarian world, but is it as beneficial as it touts itself to be? Some medical studies have claimed valuable benefits like cellular protection from the isoflavones (phytonutrients) found in soy protein. Yet, many North Americans who are regular, everyday consumers of soy have developed a sensitivity to it over the years. As is the case with gluten for some, regular consumption can bring intolerance or sensitivity over time. Before you start — or deepen — your soy love affair, there are a few factors to consider.

Digestibility
The soy bean itself can be a challenge for your body to properly digest and assimilate. It has naturally occurring enzyme inhibitors, nature’s natural defense mechanism, which interfere with efficient digestion. Proper digestive function is an important factor for good health; meaning enzyme inhibitors in foods are a valid reason to either exclude them from your diet, or learn to prepare them properly for improved digestibility.

By cooking whole food soy beans (for example, in the popular form of edamame), you can slightly improve the digestibility of soy. However, there are better ways to prepare soy — and better sources of plant-based protein that are much easier to digest.

Fermentation of soy actually breaks the plant down enough so it is easier to digest. Organic miso for instance, can be beneficial due to its increased digestibility and natural probiotics cultures developed in the fermentation process.

Over-processed and Acid-forming
Soy in commercial products tends to be over-processed (listed as isolates, lecithin or processed fillers). Whole foods are far more nutrient-dense than processed foods, and your body will recognize and use the available nutrients more efficiently. However, this legume is still highly acid-forming in your body, becoming more so in its most processed forms.

Food Sensitivity
Soy is also a common sensitivity-aggravating ingredient. Because heavily-processed soy and soy derivatives are regularly added to processed and packaged foods, soy can be hard to avoid if you’re sensitive. Many North American vegetarians who adopted the habit of having soy at nearly every meal, gained a sensitivity over a few years by developing an intolerance to it.

I suggest you have soy as condiments to meals, not as the main course.
Phytoestrogens are a chemical compound present in some plants that can mimic estrogen found in your body; soy is a legume containing phytoestrogens. An over-abundance of this chemical may cause imbalances that create challenges for your body to thrive. Make sure this ingredient works for you and is balanced with an alkaline-forming diet to support longevity.

Genetic Modification

About 98 per cent of the soy you’ll find in stores is grown from genetically modified organic (GMO) seeds. There has been some controversy around GMO crops in terms of environmental practice, mono-crops, sprays and the nutritional integrity of the plant. There simply have not been enough concrete studies around GMO foods to deem them safe or unsafe. So always look for organically grown and minimally processed protein sources.

For more *Thriving* check out Brendan's Thrive Trilogy of books.

Thrive Foods, Thrive: The Vegan Nutrition Guide, and Thrive Fitness
(In Canada: Whole Foods to Thrive: Thrive Diet, and Thrive Fitness)

USA: Da Capo Press | Canada: Penguin