MSG: Troublesome food additive or fantastic flavor enhancer?  [1]

(1) Hi Alice,

What's the deal with monosodium glutamate (MSG)? What exactly is it, and how bad is it for you really?

(2) Dear Alice,

I have recently been told I have a strong intolerance to MSG. But I am having trouble in working out what it is in. Is there any chance you could give me a list of items of food in which MSG is present in? I would be extremely grateful for any help.

Answer

Dear Readers,

Kudos to you both for looking to enhance your knowledge on this food additive. Monosodium glutamate (MSG) is a sodium salt derived from the amino acid, glutamic acid (also known as glutamate). It was discovered in 1908 by a Japanese professor named Kikunae Ikeda when he isolated the substance from seaweed broth and determined that it was behind the broth?s savory taste. Upon this discovery, it was patented and then commercially produced as a flavor enhancer. The most commonly used method of producing it today is by fermenting starch, sugar beets, sugar cane, or molasses. It?s now added to edibles such as Asian food, processed meats, and canned vegetables and soups.

Though some associate the substance with controversy, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has deemed that MSG is ?generally recognized as safe.? Many are able to ingest it with no issue. However, others report adverse reactions due to eating foods with the substance. Still, determining exactly what is safe to put on your plate if you?re prone to them can be a challenge. This is because not only can foods with added MSG trigger symptoms, but some foods with naturally occurring glutamate may also be of concern as well.

Although it?s considered a safe food additive, some may experience what is known as MSG symptom complex after eating foods containing MSG. Reactions associated with the condition may include headaches, tingling, flushing, heart palpitations, chest pain, or numbness, among others. Interestingly, researchers do recognize that some people experience these symptoms, but have not been able to replicate them with any reliability in a lab setting (as compared to a
placebo). The good news is that the symptoms are typically short-lived, mild, and don’t usually require treatment. Research has also found that adverse reactions tend to occur when individuals consume large quantities of MSG (three grams or more). People who have severe or poorly controlled asthma may also be particularly sensitive.

Those who do have sensitivity to MSG are advised to avoid it. To that end, identifying food products and restaurant menu items that contain MSG may be easiest, as they are required to be labeled as containing the substance. Being aware of MSG-laden foods is key for those who experience symptoms, but it may also be good to avoid foods that contain naturally-occurring MSG. The human body metabolizes both the natural and manufactured MSG in the same way, making them virtually indistinguishable. Foods that contain naturally-occurring MSG include, but are not be limited to:

- Tomatoes
- Cheeses
- Autolyzed yeast extract
- Soy extract
- Protein isolate
- Sodium caseinate
- Hydrolyzed plant protein
- Hydrolyzed vegetable protein (HVP)

List adapted from the FDA [2].

These foods and ingredients don’t require labeling. However, if foods have these naturally occurring MSG-containing items, the food products cannot be labeled “no MSG” or “no added MSG.” MSG also can’t be included as part of the “spices and flavoring” listing in product ingredients either.

Lastly, Reader #2, you mention you’ve been told that you have a strong intolerance to MSG. Have you been diagnosed by a medical professional? If not, you might consider speaking with a health care provider to determine if what you’re experiencing is due to MSG. If s/he does determine that you do have a sensitivity and you continue struggle to find foods that are tolerable, you might also consider a visit with a registered dietitian to help navigate the market and restaurant scene.

Here’s hoping that this response provides some food for thought,

Alice!
Category: Food Safety [3]

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