

The Many Faces of MSG

When was the last time you had a great Chinese meal, only to find yourself, an hour or two later, with a throbbing headache, an upset stomach and perhaps even an irregular heartbeat? Known anecdotally as “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome,” you were actually suffering from an overdose of monosodium glutamate, commonly known as MSG. Unfortunately, this “excitotoxic additive” (the term used by noted neurosurgeon Dr. Russell Blaylock to describe “an “excitatory amino acid that can cause sensitive neurons to die”) is added to a lot more than Chinese food. Here’s why you should be concerned.

When it was first isolated from a seaweed known as kombu in the early 20th Century, monosodium glutamate was hailed as a miracle taste enhancing agent, and thoroughly embraced by the likes of Campbell’s, Libby’s, Oscar Mayer, and Pillsbury, the crowned royals of the canned food industry. All was well until 1969 when Dr. John Olney discovered that a single dose of MSG could destroy brain cells in baby mice.

“The implications of Dr. Olney’s findings should have been earth shattering, to say the least,” says Blaylock in his 1997 landmark book, **Excitotoxins: The Taste that Kills**. “Why? Because millions of babies all over the world were eating baby foods containing large amounts of MSG... in fact, the concentration of MSG found in baby foods was equal to that used to create brain lesions in experimental animals.” So after much ado and even more pressure, the food manufacturers finally agreed to remove MSG from these baby foods.

All better? Not quite. Since excitotoxins create a real treat for our taste buds, it’s a tough act to put them back in Pandora’s Box once they’ve escaped.

So what next? In its infinite wisdom, the food industry launched the manufacture of baby *and* adult foods with a glut MSG *surrogates*—innocent enough sounding compounds with names you will surely recognize: like hydrolyzed vegetable protein, flavoring, yeast extract, textured protein, natural chicken flavor...and the list goes on. What these chemicals all have in common is they are *excitotoxic*—that is, they have the ability to damage the cells of the nervous system.

Although babies and toddlers are more susceptible to the effects of excitotoxins, adults are by no means immune. Just check out one of the numerous message boards on the Web. Excitotoxins, it seems have been linked with everything from ADD to Alzheimer’s to obesity. Which means that researchers need to get busy rigorously studying these chemicals to see which associations are valid for the population at large?

Some researchers have been busy indeed. Just one 2002 study from the Hirosaki University School of Medicine in Japan found that :“ a diet with excess sodium glutamate over a period of several years may increase glutamate concentrations in vitreous and may cause retinal [eye] cell destruction.”

The Washington, D.C – based Glutamate Association opposes these and other findings, of course. Nevertheless, while the “jury is out”, you, like my family, may want to play it safe. Watch out for MSG surrogate words, particularly if they are near the top of the ingredient list (meaning that there is a *lot* of that ingredient in the product) Avoid packaged foods with names on the label that you don’t understand. And hey, while you’re at it, why not avoid packaged foods entirely?

If I may paraphrase the highly enlightening website truthinlabeling.org, the bottom line is this: if MSG isn’t harmful, then why is its presence *hidden* on labels?

To research this hotly contested issue for yourself, here’s a list of other terrific sites that can fill you in: http://www.mercola.com/article/links/msg_links.htm . And in the interest of fairness, here’s where you can read what the Glutamate Association has to say: <http://www.msgfacts.com/>. Let me know what you think.

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