

The Hidden Cost of MSG Derivatives: A Q&A with Jenna Wunder, Registered Dietitian

By Julianne Linderman

For many of us, the verdict on MSG is still not clear. We hear that some of it is naturally occurring and therefore not dangerous; that only those with a sensitivity are susceptible to reactions; that avoiding products labeled as containing MSG is enough to steer clear of it, and so on. Please help us navigate some of this information by giving us a quick rundown on what MSG is and what's dangerous about it.

The conversation about MSG is confusing, even for trained nutritionists. Let's start with a short discussion about amino acids and proteins.

Glutamic acid is a non-essential amino acid, meaning that our bodies produce it naturally. Amino acids are the building blocks for proteins. They are necessary for building muscle, organ, and all body tissue, and they also aid in digestion. Glutamic acid is produced in the brain and is vital in the transmission of nerve impulses. Virtually every food contains glutamic acid. It's a primary component of protein-rich foods like meat, eggs, poultry, milk, cheese, and fish. Glutamic acid is also found in plant foods.

In whole, natural foods, amino acids are almost always "bound" in long chains, forming proteins. "Unbound," or "free glutamic acid," is artificially and chemically produced outside of the body. This is what is known as monosodium glutamate (MSG), or processed free glutamic acid.

In chemical plants where MSG is manufactured, bound glutamic acid is broken down into a fast-acting, high-hitting powder resembling other refined white powders, like salt and sugar. Serious inflammatory reactions can occur as the free glutamic acid is absorbed rapidly.

The reason MSG tastes good as a flavor "enhancer" is what makes it toxic. It tricks your taste buds, and as it excites neuron receptors, it becomes toxic and inflammatory, causing a range of health effects. MSG is not a food, and neither are its derivatives; they are "excitotoxins."

What are some of the common reactions it causes?

In those who are sensitive (up to 25 percent of the population, according to current estimates), the health effects can be wide ranging: cardiac, circulatory, neurological, gastrointestinal, respiratory, skin, and urological.

In my clinical practice as a registered dietitian, I always say that every body responds differently. I might respond with heart racing, insomnia, and headaches, while someone else may respond with digestive concerns like diarrhea and/or constipation, rashes, mental fog, anxiety, chronic congestion, or even weight gain. The list goes on. The effects are cumulative, so sometimes people who are otherwise healthy don't realize that part of their distressing health symptoms are related to free processed glutamic acid floating around the body.

For you, the reactions were still occurring even after you thought you had eliminated MSG from your diet. What was happening?

In 2013, I was in the middle of a health crisis. Suffering with a racing heart, migraines, and severe chronic insomnia night after night, I knew I had to get to the bottom of what was causing my issues. I knew I was sensitive to MSG, having previously discovered it contributed to migraines and insomnia, but I thought I had already cut it from my diet.

Desperate to help myself, I Googled “other names for MSG” and found a document called “Hidden Sources of MSG” (which can be found here: www.truthinlabeling.org/hiddensources.html). This article enlightened me to the fact that MSG, or processed free glutamic acid, is also in at least 40 other ingredients. As a society, we are unaware of this incredibly pertinent information!

Why is simply buying organic or avoiding products labeled as containing MSG not enough?

Organic labeling or where you buy these foods doesn't matter. I have many patients tell me “but I only shop at Whole Foods” or “but it's organic.” Unfortunately, “natural flavor” (which can be one of the names of free processed glutamic acid) remains “natural flavor” even if it is from a carton of organic chicken broth.

Tropicana orange juice is another example. Why can it contain oranges from anywhere, from any time of year, and always have the same taste? Because of a test tube of Tropicana “natural orange flavor” that was made in a laboratory. These kinds of chemical additives, “natural” or not, standardize tastes and are designed to keep you coming back for more!

What are some common ingredient names that people should watch out for?

I keep this document in my purse: www.truthinlabeling.org/hiddensources.html.

I can be found teaching fellow shoppers about this topic at grocery stores on the fly. The most important action is to read labels. Anything that you can't pronounce is a potential hazard.

Anything “hydrolyzed” or “autolyzed”

Anything containing “enzymes”

Whey protein — watch out for protein powders and protein bars

Maltodextrin

Anything that contains “natural flavors”

Carton broths and bouillon

Reduced-fat milk products (skim, part-skim, ½ percent, 1 percent, or 2 percent)

Anything “fermented,” especially commercially fermented

Vinegar (for highly sensitive people)

Most soy sauce

Yeast extract

Carrageenan

The list goes on.

How has your diet changed?

My diet has changed exponentially. Now I eat a strict whole foods diet that, for the most part, I cook myself. I buy high-quality animal products, ones where cows have been 100 percent grass-fed and chickens have been pastured and fed organic feed. I buy full-fat, raw milk dairy products from the Family Cooperative Farms here in Ann Arbor. I buy high-quality animal products from Arbor Farms on Stadium. I eat out in only a few select restaurants in town (Zingerman's, Grange, EAT, Frita Batidos, and El Harissa have many safe and delicious options), and I make sure that my food is free of gluten and preservatives.

My health crisis was two years ago. I have become my own research study on how to avoid free processed glutamic acid in totality. In the meantime, I am healing my gut using a homemade, whole foods diet that includes meat broths, plenty of high-quality animal-based saturated fat, fruits and vegetables, and small amounts of grains.

What are some more examples of foods that don't contain free processed glutamic acid?

Whole, unprocessed foods: high-quality, unprocessed meat; fruits and vegetables; whole, gluten-free grains; raw and organic nuts and nut butter; raw dairy and dairy products from exclusively grass-fed cows. Whole Foods sells sliced turkey breast and unprocessed ham at their deli counter. There are cheese manufacturers who don't add enzymes to their dairy products. Homemade meat broths that have been cooked for shorter amounts of time (4 to 6 hours) are also a wonderful choice. (Cooking broths for longer times increases the glutamate content, which may cause sensitive people to have a reaction.) I am forever grateful for the companies who don't add MSG derivatives to their products. They are heroes in my life.

MSG derivatives can be one of the pieces in your health and wellness puzzle. After going through my own health crisis, I am determined to help others experience the wellness that is available through conscious dietary choices and sustainable changes.

Let food be thy medicine.

Jenna Wunder is a registered dietitian and Certified GAPS practitioner at Natural Balance Wellness Medical Center in Ann Arbor. To contact her, call (734) 929-2696 or visit the clinic website: www.nbwellness.com. For more information on MSG derivatives, visit www.edenfoods.com/articles/view.php?articles_id=207. www.truthinlabeling.org/hiddensources.html.