

## MSG Mythbusting

Setting the record straight on this savory, but much maligned, flavoring.

### What is it?

Monosodium glutamate (MSG) is a salt form of glutamate, or glutamic acid, an amino acid (known as the building blocks of protein) created by our bodies and naturally occurring in many savory foods, including cheese, meat, tomatoes, mushrooms, and seaweed. Glutamate is broken down by the body identically regardless of source -- there is no difference to the body between free glutamate from tomatoes or MSG added to tomato sauce.



MSG is produced by fermenting starch, sugar beets, sugar cane, or molasses. Due to its savory, umami flavor, it is used to season Chinese and other East Asian cuisines, as well as many canned, fermented, and processed foods.

### Bad Rap Fueled By Racism

When MSG was discovered in the early 1900's, the US was restricting how many Chinese immigrants came to the country. The hiring of Chinese immigrants as low wage laborers contributed to widespread Anti-Chinese racism. Chinese

immigrants experienced physical violence and dehumanization; their cuisine was viewed by many as disgusting, dangerous, and dirty.

The anti-MSG movement was spurred by a 1968 letter from a doctor to the New England Journal of Medicine describing symptoms of weakness and palpitations after eating Chinese food. The journal suggested MSG was to blame. The popular media began reporting on these concerns, which were labeled "Chinese restaurant syndrome" (later termed "MSG symptom complex"). Pre-existing anti-Chinese prejudices set the backdrop for public panic about MSG. Some Chinese restaurants stopped using MSG and advertised "MSG Free" to appeal to worried patrons.

### But, is it really bad for you?

Early scientific studies on MSG were perceived to lend credibility to these fears. However, these studies used flawed methods such as injecting extremely large doses of MSG into mice, allowing participants to know whether they were consuming MSG, and involving very few participants (such as only 6 humans). In the following decades, MSG was extensively studied. Larger and higher quality studies have concluded that MSG is safe.

MSG is on the FDA's "generally recognized as safe" (GRAS) list for all people, including children and pregnant people. The World Health Organization

(WHO) and United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) agree.

### What about “MSG symptom complex”?

As with any food, a small percentage of people may have a short-term negative reaction to MSG. However, in studies with people who report a sensitivity, scientists have not been able to consistently trigger a reaction. It may be that other food components, such as sodium or other additives, are causing the body's response.

### Want to give it a try?

MSG contains just one third of the sodium in table salt. When substituted for salt, it can help reduce sodium intake without sacrificing flavor, thanks to its umami kick. This can help people who limit their sodium due to high blood pressure or other health issues. Registered Dietitian Cara Harbstreet recommends replacing your salt shaker or diluting it with MSG or adding a pinch at any point in the cooking process to amplify the umami!



### References

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## FAST FACTS

- MSG is in many foods, whether naturally or added in
- Though feared to be unhealthy, there is no scientific data to support this
- Anti-Asian prejudice is at the root of MSG myths
- MSG is a safe, FDA-approved flavor enhancer
- It contains 1/3 of the sodium in table salt

### Would you like to work with a registered dietitian?

To schedule an appointment, please obtain a referral for **Medical Nutrition Therapy** and contact:

**412-692-4497 (Oakland) OR 412-623-2421 (Shadyside)**