

# The Food Fight

What you don't know about processed foods can make you sick.

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By Megan Nix July 12, 2009

I've always loved the grocery store: rainbows of fruits, deli men who never deny the potato salad sample. But lately I've been disappointed. The reason is a sneaky substance called MSG, which hides not just in Chinese food, but also under multiple pseudonyms on both generic and organic shelves.

If you look right now, I can almost guarantee you'll find some form of it in your pantry.

The root of my distaste for MSG goes deeper than physical health; I believe we're supposed to understand what we read.

About a year ago, I stopped having the ability to digest. I cut milk out of my diet, then gluten, wheat and sugar, alternately. Still, the post-lunch pain would settle every late afternoon. I had allergy tests done, CAT scans. The doctors smiled and said, "Everything looks good." I felt like a faker, even though the stomachaches were so bad you could hear them.

The stoic non-diagnoses eventually sent me to a food-related doctor at The Care Group. There, Dr. Gerard Guillory soon offered a diagnosis: "You're MSG-intolerant."

"Poison" is what he called it, after relaying testimonies of patients who'd "gotten off the stuff" and changed their lives. As though MSG is a drug.

It very well may be.

MSG, monosodium glutamate, is in most cheese powders, broths, dressings, and processed foods made with "natural flavoring." That means it can be in the foods you eat for breakfast (cereal), lunch (deli meats), and dinner (flavored rice). It's a neurotransmitter — meaning it sends messages to the brain that trick your tongue into believing you're eating something high in protein, when you're not. It's a cheap soup's best friend. MSG tastes like salty meat and counteracts the metallic-tasting residue left behind by some foods' overnight sojourns in cans and freezers.

It's been linked to autism, obesity and chronic stomach pain.

MSG is hard to avoid because it's in practically everything, but also because its pseudonyms allow its proclivity to go largely unnoticed. MSG only has to be labeled as such if it's 100 percent MSG. Soy lethicin, hydrolyzed soy, whey, or vegetable proteins, carageenan, furikake, and autolyzed yeast are all up to 50 percent MSG. Add a few of those tough-to-read names up and you're at 100 percent, easily.

I confessed to Dr. Guillory I probably eat a diet rich in MSG, but he didn't blame me. "They need to take the damn stuff off the market," he said, with more conviction than you usually hear in a doctor's office. "It's ruining people's lives."

Mass manufacturers (shamefully silent in the new film, "Food, Inc.") would say MSG is a superhero of tastemakers: savory, delicious, invisible.

People like me and worse — those who suffer racing heart rates, states of confusion, and migraines from their food — would call MSG an arch-nemesis.

The laundry list of MSG literature and studies is long, but quiet: Scientists at the University of Madrid found a 40 percent increase in appetite in mice given MSG. A New York Times neuroscience article from February 2008 explains how imbalanced glutamate in the brain can lead to brain damage and schizophrenia.

The International Journal of Obesity and Related Metabolic Disorders and the book "Excitotoxins: The Taste that Kills" by Russel Blaylock point out that MSG partially blocks the same receptor that's fully blocked in cases of autism, Parkinson's, and Alzheimer's diseases.

I found MSG's exacerbation of asthma, IBS, and seizures corroborated by Dr. Jack Samuels of the Truth in Labeling Campaign and a long-forgotten episode of "60 Minutes" from 1992. MSG opponents also attest that aspartame, found in diet sodas and sugar-free gum, does the same destructive things, and still naysayers will claim it's a hoax or we'd all be sick.

So what about those who aren't sensitive to either aspartame or MSG? And why had I never felt the effects of MSG until now?

"Sensitivity can develop overtime," Guillory explained, "and I think a lot of people are sensitive to it and may not realize it. They might not have full-blown migraine headaches, just an inability to concentrate or fatigue. When they get off of it, they do a 180."

My first month MSG-free was extremely hard. Plan A was to be miserable about food for the rest of my life. I am an eater, by profession and by choice. Put the creamy soup with ham cubes in front of me and I'll find the bottom. But soon I noticed that unprocessed food sent me to bed pain-free, and then realized I had been going to bed with a stomachache every night for a few years.

I found farm-to-table restaurants (there are plenty in Denver). I bought unseasoned meat and beans in bulk, from places like Sunflower Market. I made potato-crusting salmon with rosemary focaccia, and switched to natural peanut butter. I cheated and ate three curly fries from Arby's one weekend and about died in my boyfriend's aunt's bathroom. But, I realized, fast-food aside, that because MSG isn't on the food pyramid, I could eat the same things as everyone else, just a little more raw, a little more real.

The downsides are time and expense. After Guillory suggested I stay away from "boxes and bags" and eat foods with five or fewer ingredients, shopping takes forever. Idling my cart in the aisles as I scrutinize makes me feel a little snooty, but it's necessary. I try to avoid the pastoral calls of pretty packaging, but my inclination is still to shop among the boxes. Eating well, like most important things, does not happen with ease.

Long-term, if we continue to eat badly, we will continue to accrue astronomical health care and environmental costs, and I believe that the nation could save itself many miseries if we all knew what went in our mouths.

As Dr. Guillory puts it, "If we ate local and organic, we wouldn't have to worry about things like MSG. We need to get back to eating food, the whole food, and nothing but the food."

The upshot of his thinking is that the food market is, by nature, democratic: We do the buying, which means we can change the market, albeit gradually.

The lesson, for me, has been that simplicity offers us a readable bounty, and that buying blindly doesn't flatten anyone's bellies. It flattens our relationships — with food, with its sources, and with ourselves.