

Could MSG be your problem too?

By Jean Stapleton

To start with, I did not recognise the problem. For many years, a meal out would be followed by an “upset stomach”, but strangely, I never even wondered why. It was soon over and forgotten - until the next time. Then came a time when I felt ill not just occasionally, but every day. I was also losing weight rapidly, not having been over-weight in the first place.

As I had digestive problems, the doctor tested for coeliac disease but the result was normal. He thought further investigations should be done, but at that point my daughter had begun to suspect what the problem was. I suggested that any investigations should be put on hold for a couple of weeks, as I thought I was on to something. The doctor looked very doubtful and advised me to be sure to come back to him if things did not improve. I did not need to go back: things improved greatly.

My daughter knew that she reacted badly to the flavour enhancer monosodium glutamate (MSG). She wondered if I could have a similar problem. It is known that many people react badly to food to which MSG has been added. However, what most people are unaware of, is that there are also over 40 ingredients, all used by the food industry, which contain the chemical in monosodium glutamate (processed free glutamic acid) that causes the bad reactions - but unfortunately these ingredients do not have to be labelled as MSG. Therefore they are sometimes referred to as the “hidden sources” of MSG. A full list can be found on either of two very helpful websites (1).

Reactions can occur immediately after food or up to one or two days later. The reaction time is usually the same for an individual – in my own case it was about six hours after food. My daughter noticed that I was slightly better in the mornings and went downhill from about 2 p.m. onwards. What was her mother eating for Breakfast? The answer to that was cornflakes followed by a boiled egg and slice of bread and butter. What could be wrong with that? She looked at the list of ingredients on the cornflakes packet and noticed that at some stage the makers had added barley malt. A little research revealed that barley malt is indeed one of the hidden sources of MSG. Once I stopped eating the cornflakes, I noticed an improvement from day one, although it was about a month before I felt really well again.

If you suffer from irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), or if you suspect that you react badly to certain foods, it is possible that your symptoms are being caused or made worse by MSG. To find out whether this is the case, you will need to exclude MSG and its “hidden sources” from your diet for three weeks. This is long enough for you to notice if there is any improvement. The ingredients you will need to exclude are those listed on the websites mentioned above (1). It is important that you also exclude the artificial sweetener aspartame, as people who react to MSG usually react to aspartame as well.

When I consume MSG it is my digestive system that is affected, but it is not the same for everyone. For example, with my daughter it affects her liver, and there are many other conditions which can be caused or made worse by MSG and its hidden sources. These include migraine, fibromyalgia, sleep disorders, arrhythmias, tachycardia, chest pain, palpitations, dizziness, panic attacks, autistic

spectrum disorders and hyperactivity (ADHD) in children, as well as neurological diseases such as Parkinson's: for a fuller list, see Debby Anglesey's website and book (1, 2).

After several good years of home cooking and careful shopping, I suffered a further, but quite different reaction: shivering attacks associated with severe acid reflux pain. It took a long time for me to recognise that this was in fact an MSG reaction, because I was, as I thought, so carefully avoiding it. In order to stave off hiatus hernia symptoms, I was taking some herbal medicine (to avoid the additives present in antacids available at the chemist's). I had no doubt that the herbs were of a good quality, but they were dispensed in some form of alcohol. I was advised to take them in hot water to destroy the alcohol content but obviously this did not work. Once it dawned on me that I was having an MSG reaction, I stopped the herbs, realising that the alcohol contained the culprit (not being an expert on alcohol I do not know what it was). The shivering attacks disappeared immediately, the pain took longer to subside, although I was encouraged by some improvement from the start. This time it took nearly three months for that really well feeling to return. So even apparent hiatus hernia symptoms can be caused or made worse by this group of ingredients.

The list of ingredients to avoid looks long and rather daunting, especially when you realise the number of products in cartons, tins or packets which contain one or more of them. You will find that even some organic foods (which are not supposed to contain any MSG), as well as foods labelled as being free of MSG, do in fact contain some of the hidden sources of MSG! Cooking whole, fresh foods from scratch is the best answer to avoiding them. Is it worth the effort? If you have been feeling "under the weather" for some time, had no help from investigations and medications (many tablets and nutritional supplements contain some of the hidden sources of MSG), it certainly is.

There is another reason for excluding these harmful food additives: none of us should be eating foods which contain them because they can cause or aggravate long-term neurological conditions whether we react to them in the short-term or not (3). The food industry has its own "scientific" research papers to inform us that neither MSG or aspartame are harmful. Sadly, this is not independent research, so when you read up on the subject you need to check the source of the information. There are huge financial implications as far as the food industry is concerned. MSG and its hidden sources are flavour enhancers, and they work. Less real food is needed when they are present. I noticed a tin of chicken soup which included just 3% chicken. Without the flavour enhancers it would surely need a great deal more chicken – and this is just one example I happened to look at recently. Is cheap food such a good idea if it comes at the expense of the nation's health? In any case, fresh foods cooked at home do not need to be more expensive, and may actually work out cheaper than processed products.

So the choice is yours. I have mainly written about the two sets of digestive symptoms I have experienced. I believe that health could improve for many people both in the short and the long-term by avoiding these harmful ingredients, referred to by one expert as excitotoxins or brain toxic additives (3), and if you have young children, by doing so you will certainly be giving them a good start for a healthy life.

A word of caution

I am not a doctor and the only reason I can recommend a three-week period of excluding MSG is that this is something anyone can do with no harmful effects. However, there is one thing to consider at the outset. If you are sensitive to MSG, but decide after three weeks that you would rather put up with your symptoms than continue to exclude it, you could suffer an enhanced reaction as you return to foods which contain it (or aspartame). It is best to settle the question before you embark on the trial period: If this does give me an improvement in health, would I be willing to make the necessary effort to continue?

Happy cooking!

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References:

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