

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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For the person who thinks they need to avoid MSG, eating can be rough. That's partly because MSG (MonoSodiumGlutamate) does not have to be listed on restaurant menus as an ingredient. It does need to be listed on food package labels. But it's also hard to eat, period, because MSG occurs naturally in so many foods. It even occurs naturally in our bodies!

If you have had a reaction that you think came from MSG, it's natural to want to avoid a repeat. When you go to a restaurant, you'll have to ask the server to please check with the cook or chef. Some will know, some will need to ask. It might get you some information. Or it might, unfortunately, get you an irritated server. Some restaurants will advertise or put on the menu that they don't use MSG. That can help.

If you are buying packaged food, you'll soon learn to read food labels carefully. The FDA does require that any MSG added to food products must be listed on the label. It could have been added as part of a yeast extract, soy extract, hydrolyzed vegetable protein or other ingredient, which must also be named in the ingredient list. There is no upper limit to how much may legally be added, only that you the consumer have the right to know it's there before you buy it.

But, how much good does it do us to know if it's there? Surprisingly, the answer is "Not much." Why? It doesn't really help much because MSG occurs naturally in almost every food, including meats and vegetables, and it occurs naturally in almost every tissue and organ of our body. We can not avoid it, we can not live without it.

The G, glutamate, comes from an amino acid, one of the building blocks of proteins. Glutamate is one of the messengers that carries information through our nervous system, helping us learn and remember. Without glutamate we would not exist, neither our muscles nor our nerves would exist or function. Most animals and many plants have glutamate as part of their essential tissues as well. So just about anything we eat will have some glutamate in it.

People living on islands or along coasts have made use of glutamate to improve the flavor of their foods for thousands of years. They just called it 'seaweed'. People in Central and South America added glutamate to their foods for centuries too. To them, it looked like 'tomatoes'. The Italians added it to their menus with gusto! The earliest people who learned to make and age cheese thought they liked the flavor of cheese, not knowing they were tasting glutamate there too. Mushrooms, peas, seafood and meats all have enough glutamate to make other foods taste better too. Today MSG is made from corn or molasses. That's the 'trick' of MSG, it makes all kinds of foods taste good, even better than just adding salt does. The S of MSG is sodium, but MSG has only a quarter as much sodium in a teaspoon as salt does.

So why do some people have reactions to MSG? That's very hard to say, because most people don't react all the time. It does seem that if some people are given a very large amount of MSG by itself, not with other food, they might get headaches or flushing. But most of the time there is no reaction. Long-term studies have also been unable to find any signs of nervous system damage or any other danger, despite what some websites will claim. Most of the MSG we eat comes naturally in the food. There is no difference between added and natural MSG.

Here's a good example of how well some natural sources of MSG improve the flavors of food. While the pie bakes make a big salad and dinner will be ready. Enjoy!

Florida Tomato Pie

2 eggs, or equivalent egg substitute	1 ½ cups low fat milk
8 oz (2 C) shredded Swiss or Cheddar cheese	½ cup chopped onion
1 tsp salt	¼ tsp pepper or paprika
1 ripe Florida tomato, chopped	1 ripe Florida tomato, sliced thinly
1 Tbsp grated Parmesan cheese	1 9" pie shell, frozen or packaged

Bake pie shell according to package directions. Allow chopped tomato to drain slightly. Set oven to 325°F. While it bakes, lightly beat eggs in medium bowl. Stir in Swiss or Cheddar cheese, milk, onion, salt and pepper or paprika. Gently stir in chopped tomato. Pour into baked pie shell and bake for 30 minutes. Remove from oven, arrange tomato slices over top and sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Return to oven and bake an additional 25 minutes. A knife inserted into the center should come out clean. Let stand 10 minutes before slicing. Serves 4.