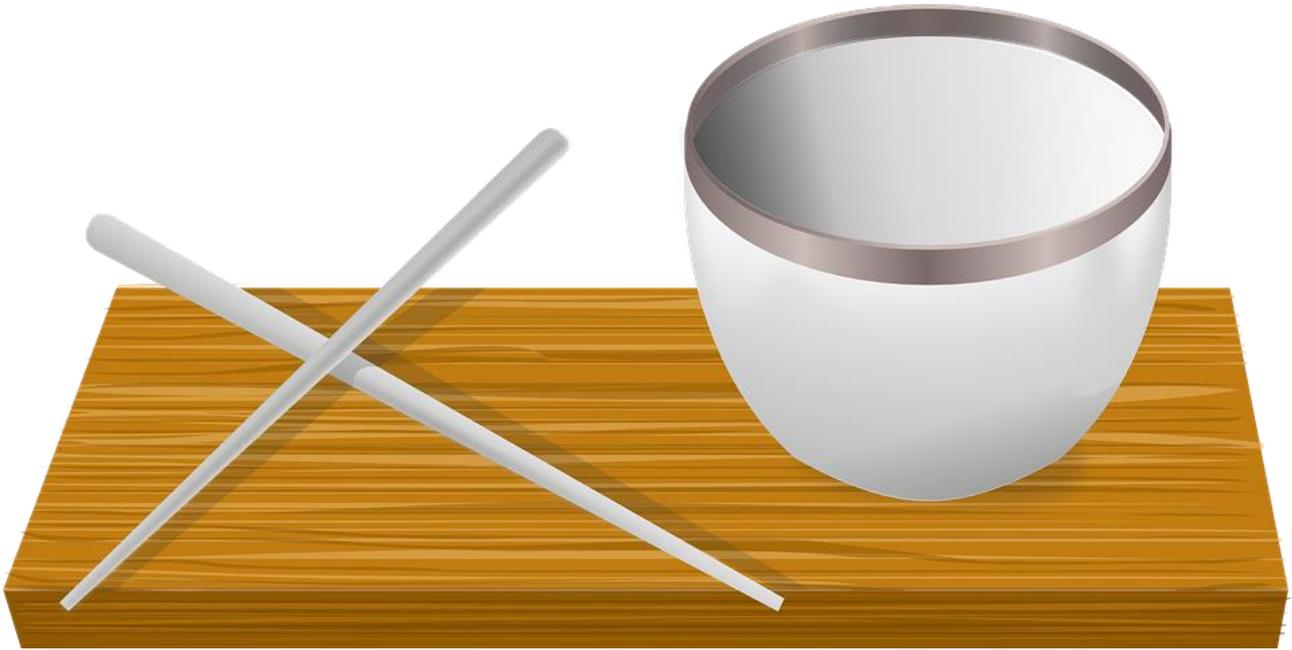


What is MSG?

by Julie O'Connell Seamer



MSG are the initials for the food additive monosodium glutamate. More specifically, MSG is a sodium salt of the amino acid L-glutamic. Abundant in nature, glutamine acid is made by the body existing as a free glutamate or with other amino acids, to make proteins.

MSG's history as a flavour enhancer began over 1,200 years ago in Japan when it was discovered that food flavours were enhanced by adding stock made with seaweed. Seaweed contains glutamate. Other foods that contain natural glutamate (or free glutamate) include Vegemite, ham, some vegetables including cabbage and tomatoes.

Eventually, this acid was isolated in the early 1900's, and added to packaged foods for flavour enhancement. Glutamate based flavour enhancers have code numbers (found on ingredient labels) 620-625. MSG is 621. While products may be labelled MSG free, they may still contain other glutamate based flavour enhancers.

Safety concerns about MSG were raised when in 1968 Dr Robert Kwok, a Chinese doctor living in the United States wrote to the New England Journal of medicine describing symptoms he'd experienced after eating Chinese food. He labelled this "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome".

Since then MSG has been blamed for food reactions and allergies. However Australian food standards declare it to be safe for consumption. While the average person will consume approximately 10,000-20,000 milligrams of free glutamates from their diet each day, MSG has levels of glutamate between 100-800 milligrams per 100grams of food.

There appears to be lack of substantiating evidence proving that MSG can spur allergic reactions; however it is generally known that some people are sensitive to it and are better off avoiding foods containing MSG, the food additive. This particularly relates to children, because their small bodies can be more vulnerable to certain chemical compounds.

If you are concerned about any potential food sensitivities that you might have, taking the "Food Detective" test may be an option - although first port of call is of course to start avoiding food additives whenever possible.

What is MSG?