

# nutrition **HEAL**

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BY LIFE & TIMES

**I**N our quest for better health, it has become convenient to vilify food items than to evaluate our overall diet in addressing declining health conditions. Excluding "bad food" in our daily intake provides a mental mirage that we are doing something right.

Salt, for instance, has an adverse effect on blood pressure if taken excessively but nothing is perhaps more vilified than monosodium glutamate, or MSG.

Some people claim it makes them sick. Others believe it causes hair to fall. Some people read labels only to look for those three letters, without which, they assume that a pack of processed food passes the health test.

But the fact is, MSG itself is not the problem.

According to medical website webMD, "studies haven't found any regular pattern of symptoms that could be typical of a reaction to MSG".

It notes that while there are cases of sensitivity, it is extremely rare. Mayo



Some of the products displayed at the Ajinomoto mini museum at its headquarters.



Lee preparing tuna tartar with onsen egg. He says using ingredients with naturally-occurring umami can help reduce salt use.

## GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF MSG

A popular flavouring ingredient may help reduce overall sodium intake, writes **Syida Lizta Amirul Ihsan**



Clinic, another medical website, echoes that view.

"It's very hard for me to believe that there's a problem with MSG," says Marion Nestle, a prominent advocate of healthy food, who is also a professor of nutrition and public health at New York University. "People who think they have problems with it should avoid it."

### DEMISTIFYING PERCEPTION

For Ajinomoto (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, whose main business is producing MSG, both in its pure, crystal form and in food seasoning, the reputation stacked against it is so high that it held an event to demystify false perceptions surrounding the ingredient.

"The word sodium is in monosodium glutamate itself and so, the association is straightforward. Consumers don't call table salt sodium chloride," says Cindy Chan, from the company's corporate communications department, during the event.

Chemically, table salt is sodium chloride, made up of 40 per cent sodium and 60 per cent chloride. Monosodium glutamate, meanwhile, is a combination of sodium and glutamate acid, naturally-occurring in tomato, soya bean and seaweed, among others. Biologically, the body processes sodium (any type) the same way.

Glutamate is a flavour enhancer that gives food a rounder, fuller taste. Discovered by Japanese professor Dr Kikunae Ikeda in 1908, it is known as umami and researchers call this "the fifth essential flavour", after sweet, salty, bitter, and sour.

### REDUCING SODIUM

For chef Bernard Lee, using MSG judiciously in cooking helps him reduce the use of salt and sugar.

"When seasoning, use MSG first. Then add on sugar and salt if necessary. This way, you reduce their use," he says.

At the event, he showed how to make onsen egg, a soft-boiled egg with slightly runny yolk, served with tuna.

"When you cook, use a lot of ripe tomato, cheese, grapes, fish and kelp. Umami exists naturally in these items. If you cook tomato, for example, you will get that savoury, brothy taste that characterises umami," he explains.

Universiti Putra Malaysia dietitian Dr Zulfitri Azuan Mat Daud, whose research expertise is dietary requirement for end-stage renal disease patients, says using MSG offers a way to reduce sodium intake, which is very important for those with kidney problem.

"Umami helps with the flavouring of food and using it may reduce the use of sodium to up to 30 per cent. This reduction means a lot to those with weak or failing kidneys, because the kidneys are not burdened with so much sodium to process," he says.

Zulfitri, who is interested in sodium reduction strategies, has found in his studies, that many people don't think reducing salt intake is important, although they know that persistently high blood pressure increases the risk of heart attack and stroke.

"Many people do not realise that incorporating MSG is a method of sodium reduction. The flavour it gives means you need to use less table salt without com-

promising taste," he says.

Taste is the main reason people don't take salt reduction seriously. "They don't find bland food appetising," he says.

Sodium reduction is even more important for the ageing population, he adds. As one ages, the sharpness of tastebuds decreases, which means more salt is needed for food to be palatable.

Zulfitri says: "MSG reduces the need to add more salt in cooking. For the elderly, who may have other illnesses, this is a positive move."

He says local ruling for food labelling is voluntary, so customers cannot really gauge the amount of salt present in packed foods, if the manufacturers don't want to disclose it.

"If food labelling regulation is mandatory, then customers will have a better idea of the amount of salt present and they can make better choices, irrespective of in what form that salt is," he says.

Another public perception that Ajinomoto is battling is that the company produces all MSG found in the market. This is not true.

"We may be the oldest company that makes MSG, but other manufacturers produce MSG too. We don't know how they are made and sometimes they are sold in gunny sacks in sundry stores," says Chan.

"Yet when people encounter problem after the consumption of such an item, we are the ones they call to complain."

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Zulfitri Azuan Mat Daud



Tuna tartar served with onsen egg.