

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“FDA-Approved Food Additives That Can Cause Brain Damage”

Just because a product is FDA-approved doesn't mean that it can't cause serious side effects. **MSG.** For instance, chicken sandwiches from Popeye's, Chick-fil-A, and McDonald's all contain monosodium glutamate (MSG), a type of excitatory neurotoxin (excitotoxin) that has been shown to adversely affect the brain. Many people perceive that MSG enhances the savory, umami (savory taste) flavor of certain foods. A conscious effort has been made to eliminate the use of MSG across the food industry. However, the excitotoxin is currently approved for public consumption by the FDA—and has been since the 1980s. It can be found in food products ranging from potato chips and salad dressing to chicken noodle soup and protein powder. MSG is a controversial food-additive used in canned food, crackers, meat, salad dressings, frozen dinners and a myriad of other products. **Glutamate.** Glutamate is essential for brain health, but too much can have serious neurological adverse effects. Too much dietary glutamate, however, can severely disrupt normal cellular function, particularly in the brain. The toxic effects can include CNS disorder, obesity, disruptions in adipose tissue physiology, hepatic damage, CRS and reproductive malfunctions. **Aspartame.** Another excitotoxin that has stirred up similar controversy is aspartame. Aspartame can be found on the ingredient lists of many low-calorie or diet-food products. Although hundreds of studies support aspartame's safety, countless others do not. *MDLinx* previously reported on the harmful cognitive, mental health, and neurological effects associated with aspartame consumption. Notably, high aspartame intake has been shown to induce or exacerbate headaches, and some researchers have linked the artificial sweetener to higher risks of dementia and seizures. **Phenylalanine.** Because phenylalanine can be found in so many food products and medications, the risks of excess consumption and toxicity are high, which can be especially dangerous for people with phenylketonuria (PKU). Individuals with PKU are unable to process phenylalanine properly. Phenylalanine can cause intellectual disabilities, brain damage, and seizures in people with PKU. It is also sold as a dietary supplement and is a component of aspartame. **Cysteine.** Cysteine is an amino acid and food additive that's used to extend the shelf life of bread and other food products. High cysteine levels have been associated with the development of neurological disease, including Parkinson disease and Alzheimer disease. **Casein.** Casein is a protein compound that can be found in cheese at naturally high levels. It can be found in margarine, bread, whipped toppings, and bakery glazes. But it can also be found in more health-conscious foods like protein bars, yogurt, and infant formula. Researchers have shown that high casein intake can disrupt the blood-brain barrier and cause neuroinflammation.

In the America that I love, please be careful with the amounts of possible neurotoxins that you ingest.

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