



Dangers of soy and oyster sauces overstated

Urban legends abound about many foods and food ingredients. Some legends are total myths. Some are based on facts stretched too far. Other legends are based on information found to be false and some legends may or may not prove to be true when appropriate research is conducted.

Here are two current food rumors. One has some support. The other has little.

Question: Do soy and oyster sauces cause cancer?

Answer: Not likely. Concerns that these sauces may cause cancer were based initially on the 1999 findings of the Food Standards Agency of the United Kingdom. They found that some soy and oyster sauces contained excessive amounts of two forms of chloropropanol, chemicals with the potential to cause cancer. The affected products came from Thailand, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Following suit, the Australia New Zealand Food Authority investigated brands sold in their countries. The New Zealand Ministry of Health analyzed 89 brands of soy and oyster sauces for chloropropanol content. They found 12 brands exceeded their Emergency Food Standard of 1 milligram per

kilogram of sauce.

Naturally brewed soy sauces did not contain chloropropanols. Some (but not all) of the brands produced by a process called acid hydrolysis contained the chemicals.

Brands containing unacceptable levels were publicized in various countries and most were pulled from markets. Since April 2002, safety limits established by the European Union have been enforced.

Manufacturers of contaminated brands, under international pressure, have changed their processes to comply with new regulations. The problem seems to be history.

The main concern related to these chemicals regarded people who consumed high levels of the products over an extended period of time. Worldwide regulatory actions should make this concern a mere memory. No doubt, however, the legend will live on.

Q: Is MSG a dangerous poison?

A: No. MSG stands for monosodium glutamate and is actually a common component of almost every natural food. MSG just means one sodium atom and a glutamate molecule. Glutamate is a common amino acid found in protein. So, any food that contains protein contains the glutamate

molecule.

Glutamate provides much of the flavor in tomatoes. Some of the flavor in soy sauce is from glutamate formed by the breakdown of soy protein during production.

Q: Is MSG a problem for some people and should it be banned?

A: Yes and no. An adverse reaction to MSG, sometimes called Chinese Restaurant syndrome, is much less common than most people think.

One well-designed research study tested 130 people who believed they had a problem with MSG. Only two of these people consistently reacted when they consumed a drink that contained about 1 rounded teaspoon of MSG. But they had no reaction when they consumed this amount of MSG in food.

To put this into perspective, some people have much more serious, life-threatening, allergic reactions to food ingredients as common as peanuts, wheat and corn. These individuals need to carefully read food labels. Because even minor traces of common foods can be dangerous, manufacturers often add statements such as, "May contain peanuts."

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