



c/o SENSE ABOUT SCIENCE
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Registered Charity No. 1146170
Registered Company No. 6771027

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Dear CEO

Claims on your products and in your policies are seriously misinforming your customers about health risks. Would you take action to address it?

Scientific evidence does not support rumours about health effects from the flavour enhancer monosodium glutamate (MSG), or from foods containing the product of plants that were genetically modified (GM), or from the sweetener aspartame or from parabens, which are used to preserve toiletries. We are sure your in-house experts know this. However, your company and other supermarkets are appealing to the fears and rumours that have circulated about these substances, by advertising products as free from them.

We are scientists as well as customers. Like many of our colleagues, we work hard to put evidence into public discussion and to challenge misleading information. Over the past few months we have been asking supermarkets to give reasons for this negative marketing. We have not received any evidence about health risks from any of you. Instead, those supermarkets which responded have without exception said that the policies are a response to customer concerns.

This blames the customer. But how on earth are people supposed to work out which health concerns are well founded, and which are not, if supermarkets arbitrarily take up health fears as a sales tool? If your products and policies promote the idea that being MSG free or paraben free is a benefit, you are part of leading that misinformation.

We are writing this open letter to you and other supermarkets because evidence is vital to proper care for your customers. Joining in with misleading information through negative marketing is short-sighted and wrong. It is undermining people's attempts to work out what is good for their health, even pushing them towards alternatives which may not be good for them. It is undermining our efforts to help people make sense of stories about food. It also undermines any attempt you make to point to the evidence on other scare stories that affect your products.

A note on the scientific evidence is attachedⁱ. Will you review these policies?

Yours sincerely

Members of the Voice of Young Science networkⁱⁱ



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Voice of Young Science (VoYS) is a network which consists of hundreds of early career researchers who want to stand up for science in public discussions. VoYS members tackle misconceptions, challenge pseudoscientific product claims and respond to misinformation in all kinds of media.
www.senseaboutscience.org/voys.html

ⁱ **Note on the scientific evidence**

GM (foodstuffs from genetically modified organisms)

The European Commission has produced two reports reviewing research on the effects GM crops have on health and the environment. Neither review found evidence of higher risk of negative health outcomes from GM food consumption compared to conventional food^{1,2}. The conclusion of the latest report, after more than “130 research projects, covering a period of more than 25 years of research, and involving more than 500 independent research groups, is that biotechnology, and in particular GMOs, are not per se more risky than e.g. conventional plant breeding technologies.”²

1. EC-Sponsored research on safety of genetically modified organisms (covering research published 1985 and 2000)
2. A decade of EU-funded GMO research (covering research published between 2001-2010).

Monosodium Glutamate (MSG)

Monosodium glutamate is a salt of the amino acid glutamate, a significant part of protein in our food supply and proteins in our bodies. Glutamate is glutamate no matter what its source – whether seasoning, vegetables, meat or milk. The Joint Expert Committee on Food Additives (JECFA) of the United Nations Food & Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Health Organisation (WHO), after review of the available scientific literature³, has evaluated MSG as “Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI) not specified” This means that MSG is safe for everyone and that an upper intake limit does not need to be set.

Suspected adverse reactions and allergies to MSG have been investigated, including by the Scientific Committee on Food (the predecessor of EFSA)⁴. Most recently, in 2003 the Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) reviewed the evidence and concluded “there is no convincing evidence that MSG is a significant factor in causing systemic reactions resulting in severe illness or mortality”⁵. People do report themselves as being sensitive to MSG. However in studies when these individuals are given MSG or a placebo scientists have been unable to show a link between MSG and a reaction⁶.

MSG can be used in recipes to reduce significantly the salt (sodium chloride or NaCl) content of the dish without reducing its palatability⁷.

3. WHO 1988. Toxicological Evaluation of Certain Food Additives (prepared by the 31st meeting of JECFA). WHO Food Additives Series NO 22, Cambridge University Press.
4. Report of the Scientific Committee for Food on Adverse Reactions to Food and Food Ingredients. Food Sciences and Techniques, EC, 1997, 1-29
5. Monosodium Glutamate (MSG): A Safety Assessment. FSANZ, 2003
6. Geha RS et al. Multicenter, double-blind, placebo-controlled, multiple challenge evaluation of reported reactions to monosodium glutamate. *J. Allergy Clin. Immunol.*, 2000, 106;973-980
7. Yamaguchi et al. 1984, *Journal Food Sci* 49(1) 82-85

Parabens

Parabens are a group of preservatives used to prevent fungal and bacterial contamination of cosmetic products. The European Union and US authorities have both found parabens safe to use in cosmetic products at Recommended Daily Allowances (RDAs)⁸. With the FDA stating “there is no reason for consumers to be concerned about the use of cosmetics containing parabens”⁹.

8. EU Scientific Committee on Consumer Safety (SCCS) opinion on Parabens, 2010

9. FDA, Product and ingredient safety, Parabens, 2007

Aspartame

Aspartame is a low calorie sweetener, which is the methyl ester of two natural amino acids, is 200 times sweeter than sugar and is used in tiny amounts to replace the sweetness and calories of sugar in foods and beverages. Aspartame is one of the most thoroughly researched additives in our food supply and has a history of more than 30 years safe use in Europe and around the world.

Like all additives, the science which supports its safety is reviewed regularly. The major review, completed by the Scientific Committee on Food in December 2002, pointed to the reason why consumers can have confidence in aspartame's safety “Aspartame is unique among the intense sweeteners in that the intake of its component parts can be compared with intakes of the same substances from natural foods. It is clear that the consumption of aspartame represents only a minor source of aspartic acid, phenylalanine or methanol in the diet”¹⁰.

The science which supports the safety of low calorie sweeteners is thoroughly reviewed before they are approved for use in food and beverages; all of the low calorie sweeteners approved for use have been shown to be safe. While the use of low calorie sweeteners does not, in itself, result in weight loss, their use may encourage people to stick with a reduced energy diet by improving its diversity, variety and overall palatability^{11, 12}.

10. Opinion of the Scientific Committee on Food: Update on the Safety of Aspartame. December 2002

11. The Journal of Nutrition, Supplement: Low Calorie Sweeteners, Appetite and Weight Control - what the Science Tells Us. 2012.

12. De la Hunty et al. A review of the effectiveness of aspartame in helping with weight control. Nutrition Bulletin 31, 115-128. 2006