

Understanding Taste and Smell Changes During Cancer Treatment

Many people undergoing cancer therapy experience changes in taste and smell. These changes can lead to food dislikes (food aversions), making it harder to eat and drink. Proper management can help maintain your nutrition and improve your comfort during treatment.

What Causes Taste and Smell Changes?

Several factors can alter your senses:

- **Cancer-related causes:** Cancers in the head and neck area, or those treated with radiation, surgery, or certain chemotherapies.
- **Side effects from treatments:** Mouth sores, dry mouth from cancer therapy, antibiotics, or pain medications.
- **Other factors:** Dental issues, smoking, and medicines for other health conditions (high blood pressure, diabetes, thyroid problems).

Symptoms of Taste and Smell Changes

- Foods tasting bitter, salty, or bland
- All foods tasting the same or "metallic"
- Foods smelling different or less fragrant
- Certain smells becoming overpowering or intolerable
- Changes may resolve after treatment, but can sometimes last a long time

How to Manage Taste and Smell Changes

See a dental or mouth specialist to rule out oral health problems and ask for advice on mouth care or special rinses.

Consult a dietitian to find foods and recipes that suit your new taste preferences.

Ask your team about medications, such as zinc supplements or other drugs like dronabinol, which may help improve taste.

Quit smoking if you use tobacco—this can improve your senses.

Tips to Improve Food Tastes and Smells

- **Identify foods you like or dislike** by keeping a food diary—this helps plan meals that are more tolerable.
- **Manage nausea:** Avoid eating 1–2 hours before and 3 hours after chemotherapy to prevent food aversions.
- **Mask metallic tastes:** Use plastic utensils, glass cookware, or try mint, lemon, or orange flavored candies and gums.
- **Enhance flavors:** Add herbs, spices, lemon, vinegar, or sweeteners to foods to boost taste; marinate meats in flavorful liquids.
- **Serve foods differently:** Eat cold or at room temperature to lessen strong tastes and smells.
- **Choose fresh produce:** Fruits and vegetables often taste better than canned or frozen.
- **Use aromatics cautiously:** Keep foods covered and cook outdoors or with a kitchen fan to reduce bad smells.
- **Try alternative proteins:** If red meats taste strange, opt for chicken, fish, beans, tofu, eggs, nuts, or cheese.
- **Blend fruits into smoothies or desserts** like yogurt or ice cream to make eating more appealing.
- **Maintain mouth cleanliness** by brushing teeth regularly and rinsing with baking soda and salt water (mix 1 teaspoon each in 4 cups of water).

When to Contact Your Care Team

Notify your care team if:

- You notice significant taste or smell changes
- Eating or drinking becomes difficult
- You have trouble maintaining weight
- You experience persistent or worsening symptoms

Keeping a list of foods and smells that bother you can help your team tailor strategies to improve your eating experience.

Summary

Taste and smell changes are common but manageable. By making food adjustments, maintaining good oral hygiene, and collaborating with your healthcare team, you can preserve your nutrition and improve your overall well-being during cancer treatment.

Don't hesitate to share your experiences with your care team—help is available to support your nutritional health and comfort.

Notes

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