

Tasting and enjoying food is very important to most of us. Taste changes while going through cancer treatment are common – approximately half of people receiving chemotherapy experience taste changes. In addition to chemo, Radiation therapy to the neck or head can harm the taste buds and salivary glands, causing changes in taste and sometimes in the sense of smell.

Taste and smell changes can make it very difficult to eat healthy and maintain weight. It can also cause emotional distress and depression. Side effects vary by person and you may be affected differently than someone else receiving the same type of treatment. Symptoms may change from meal to meal or day to day. It is very important that you tell your doctor if you are having any taste changes that are contributing to poor intake and weight loss.

### **Chemotherapy**

- Chemotherapy destroys rapidly dividing cancer cells, but it can also damage normal cells, such as taste buds in the mouth. The spread of the chemotherapy into the tissue of the mouth can also cause taste changes.
- Taste changes caused by chemotherapy usually begin a week after starting chemotherapy and usually improve before your next treatment. At the end of treatment, taste may start to improve within one week and usually returns to normal within three to four weeks.

### **Radiation Therapy**

- Radiation therapy to the head and neck may damage the taste buds and saliva glands, causing dry mouth, taste and smell changes. It may also contribute to mouth infections, dry mouth, or dental or gum problems. Ask your physician or nurse about medications, mouthwashes and other ways to help with these problems.
- Taste changes often begin 2-3 weeks after the first radiation treatment. The return of your taste will usually start to improve 3 weeks to 2 months after treatment. Taste changes may continue to improve for a year.

**The good news is that taste and smell changes are usually not permanent and most will resolve with time.**

Listed below are some taste and smell changes you may notice:

- Foods may taste differently than before and take on a bitter, metallic, chemical, sweet, and/or salty taste.
- The texture of food might change.
- Some foods may taste bland, have no taste or all foods taste the same.
- Food smells may bother you.

### **Strategies for Managing Taste and Smell Changes**

- Brush your tongue & teeth gently before all meals, unless you have sores in your mouth. If you floss, continue to do so unless you have been told not to by your doctor or nurse.
- Rinse your mouth frequently and before you eat. Rinse with tea, ginger ale, saltwater or baking soda & water to help neutralize bad tastes in your mouth. Add ½ tsp. of baking soda or salt to 1 cup of warm water. Ask your doctor about mouthwashes that might help.
- Chew gum, suck on hard mints & flavored candies such as mint, ginger, lemon (lemon drops) or orange. Try tart flavors foods/drinks such lemonade or limeade, orange or lime sherbet. .
- Try eating cold foods as their odor and taste are not as strong. Examples: popsicles, yogurt, frozen fruit (blueberries, strawberries, raspberries, etc.), cold boiled eggs, chicken salad, tuna or egg salad, macaroni

or potato salad, juices and fruit nectars, cottage cheese, frozen yogurt, pudding, sherbet or ice cream, smoothies and shakes.

- Drink through a straw to bypass taste buds.
- Choose foods that look & smell good.
- Try new foods (even foods that you did not like in the past).
- Use different flavors in cooking such as basil, cilantro, garlic, rosemary, lemon, tarragon, dill or mint.
- Do not eat one to two hours before & up to three hours after chemotherapy to prevent food aversions caused by nausea and vomiting.
- Stay hydrated, drink lots of fluid.
- Treat food like medication. Even if it does not taste good, your body needs food in order to heal and to avoid delays in your treatment. Ask your doctor about using zinc sulfate supplements, which may improve taste for some people.

**Foods taste too sweet:**

- Add 6 drops of lemon or lime juice to food. Keep adding in small increments until the sweet taste is muted.
- For drinks or shakes, blend frozen cranberries or add 1-2 Tablespoons of lemon juice to a high-protein liquid supplement. Try with a nutritional drink or shake to make it taste less sweet.
- Add 1 to 2 teaspoons of finely ground, decaffeinated coffee to a chocolate or vanilla high protein liquid supplement to cut the sweetness and give the shake a 'mocha' flavor.
- Make a smoothie or shake using plain yogurt as the base. Plain yogurt has a slightly sour taste that may decrease sweetness of the smoothie.
- In place of sweet snacks, choose other foods, such as: cheese, pretzels with dip or salsa, cottage cheese, nuts, peanut butter, deviled eggs.

**Foods taste metallic:**

- Use plastic utensils and glass cookware. Add a little sweetener, like maple syrup or agave nectar, and a squeeze of lemon. You could also try adding fat, such as a nut butter or cream. Try eating fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables rather than canned.

**Foods taste too salty:**

- Add 1/4 teaspoon of lemon juice to help erase the taste of salt. Try low sodium products or add a little sugar to cut down on the salty taste.

**Foods taste too bitter:**

- Add a little sweetener, like maple syrup or agave nectar. Cook meats and chicken in sweet and sour sauces, citrus fruit juice or marinate in Italian dressing.

**Foods taste like cardboard:**

- Marinate, season or cook chicken, fish & red meats in sweet juices, meat marinades, lemon, marinara sauce, flavored vinegars, salad dressings, wine, sesame oil. Use sweet & sour mixes, barbeque or honey glazes. Add horseradish or spicy mustards, chopped green or red bell peppers, cumin, chili powder, onion or garlic. Top foods with sharp shredded cheese.
- Add more sea salt until the flavor of the dish moves toward the front of the mouth. A spritz of fresh lemon or lime juice also helps.

**Foods taste strong:**

- Try mild-tasting foods, such as plain crackers, toast, dry cereals, mashed potatoes, milk, steamed rice, plain yogurt, plain noodles and butter, custard, pudding, cottage cheese, sherbet, and gelatin.

**Smells bother you:**

- When cooking, use an exhaust fan, keep lid on while cooking or use an outdoor grill. Buy precooked foods. Cold or room temperature foods also have less odor. Use the microwave to cook foods.
- Try foods that have minimal odors and short cooking time, such as French toast, pancakes, oatmeal, pasta, cream of wheat, etc.
- Ask friends or family to help you prepare foods & stay away from the kitchen. Keep foods covered and when opening, lift lids away from you.
- If you are using high protein nutritional drink or shake, try drinking them in a covered container such as a 'to-go' coffee container. Sometimes foods or beverages will taste better if you cannot smell the food before eating or drinking it.

**Meat does not taste right:**

- Red meats often do not taste right during treatment – make sure the meat is fresh and cooked properly.
- Chicken, fish and turkey are great protein choices.
- Try other "non-meat" protein sources such as beans or peas in soups, chicken salad or tuna salad, cheese, cottage cheese, egg dishes, beans and rice, eggnog, beans and cornbread, quinoa, stir-fried tofu, macaroni and cheese, milk, ice cream, malts, shakes, puddings and custard.
- Marinate meats in salad dressing or add sauces, spices, and ketchup to help improve the flavor.
- Make dishes with meat prepared in combination with other foods such as chili, lasagna, spaghetti sauce, casseroles, stews or hearty soups.

**References**

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Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. Retrieved November 12, 2021, from [www.eatright.org](http://www.eatright.org)