

Food Ideas to Help with Taste and Smell Changes

Many people notice changes in taste and smell during cancer treatment. Taste and smell changes can vary with the type of treatment you receive, be different for each person and vary from day to day. This can lead to frustration around eating.

Food and drinks can taste different, can have less taste or have no taste at all. You may also find that you are more sensitive to food aromas or overall smells in general.

It can be a few weeks or even months after treatment before you notice an improvement in taste and smell changes.

The following tips may make taste and smell changes more tolerable.

General Tips

- **Keep your mouth clean.**
 - Brush your teeth and tongue often using a soft toothbrush.

Mouth Rinse Recipe and Instructions

1. Mix 5 mL (1 teaspoon) of baking soda and 5 mL of salt with 1000 mL (4 cups) of water.
2. Put the mouth rinse in a container with a lid.
3. Keep the mouth rinse at room temperature.
4. Throw away the mouth rinse at the end of the day and make a new batch.

How to use your mouth rinse:

1. Shake well before using.
2. Rinse and gargle with 15 mL (1 tablespoon) and then spit out.
3. Repeat 2 or 3 times at each use.
4. Use mouth rinse every 2 hours during the day.

Use the mouth rinse until your mouth returns to normal. This may take many weeks or months.

Use mouth rinse or water after eating and drinking. Rinse after drinking meal replacement drinks or sports drinks as these have a lot of sugar.

Use a soft toothbrush and gently brush your teeth or dentures after every meal. Use the toothbrush to clean your tongue after you brush. Remove dentures at night.

- **Try different foods and flavours and/or drinks.**
 - Keep a list of foods that taste good to you.

- Try new foods or different brands that you may not usually eat. Experiment with a new recipe or a different product brand.
- Alternate bites of different tasting foods and textures at a meal. For example, buffet foods can give you more variety, texture and smell options to try.
- **Focus on foods that taste good** at the moment, even if this means eating the same foods every day for a while.
- **Drink plenty of fluids with a meal to try and help improve taste.**
 - Not drinking enough fluids can lead to a dry mouth that can further affect taste changes.
- **Have small meals and snacks through the day.** The first few bites may taste normal but then taste can change. Eating often will help your body get enough nutrients.
- **Suck on hard, sugarless candies and mints or chew on sugarless gum.** This may help remove any bad mouth taste between meals.

What type of taste changes do you have?

- **Metallic taste:**
 - Avoid bitter or metallic tasting food such as red meat, coffee or chocolate.
 - Eat foods at cold or room temperature. Some people can also tolerate frozen fruit such as frozen grapes, melon and oranges.
 - Try different protein foods with mild flavours such as chicken, turkey, tofu, dairy products (milk, cheese, cottage cheese, yogurt), milk alternatives (soy milk or coconut milk), tuna, salmon, legumes (beans, lentils pea soup), and eggs (eggs, omelette or quiche).
 - Marinate meat, chicken and fish. Use marinades such as lemon juice, sweet and sour sauce, wine, teriyaki or soy sauce, Italian dressing, or barbecue sauce.
 - Use plastic utensils or chopsticks instead of metal utensils for eating.
 - Use glass cookware instead of metal pots and pans with enamel coating for cooking or storing food.
 - Have fresh or frozen foods in place of canned foods and drinks.
 - Use applesauce, mint jelly, red pepper jelly or cranberry sauce when cooking with meat or poultry.

- **Overly sweet taste:**

- Dilute drinks with water, milk, soda water, tonic water or ice.
- Add a pinch of salt to decrease sweetness.

- **Too salty taste:**

- Try a variety of low salt or sodium-reduced products.
- Add a pinch of sugar or honey to help mask the salty flavour.
- Use herbs and seasonings in place of salt when seasoning to prepare foods (thyme, parsley, oregano, basil, garlic, ginger, cinnamon, lemon pepper).

- **Bitter taste:**

- Sprinkle a bit of sugar, maple syrup or honey on foods or add to liquids.
- Have sweet fruits with meals or sweet condiments such as chutney, ketchup, mint jelly, BBQ sauce, or applesauce.
- Drink ginger flavoured water or mint tea with meals.
- Suck on a sugar-free mint candy.

- **Bland or no taste:**

- Include sour or tart foods or fluids to stimulate the taste buds.
- Flavour foods with condiments (barbecue sauce, mustard, ketchup, mint, soy sauce, pickles, chutneys).
- Use herbs and seasonings in food preparation (thyme, parsley, oregano, basil, garlic, ginger, cinnamon, seasoned salt, lemon pepper)
- Try more flavourful foods (salsa, marinated meats, aged cheeses) or add fats or sauces when making foods.
- On the other hand, you could reduce seasonings or spices. Try choosing foods with less flavour to limit your expectation on taste (egg sandwich, cereal, polenta, rice or tapioca pudding, custard, tofu, mashed potatoes, hummus, cottage cheese, perogies or omelette).
- Try eating foods with different textures and colours at a meal.

- **Bad taste:**

- Try the bad tasting food again a few weeks later. For example, some people may not tolerate spicy foods now but find they taste better after a while.

- Replace “off tasting” foods with foods that taste good to you. This will help your body get the important nutrients it needs.
- Add moisture such as a gravy or sauce to dry foods to make them easier to eat.
- Try soft, smooth, creamy or blended foods that require less chewing as they may be better tolerated.
- Try different tasting foods such as sour, salty, sweet or bitter choices. Eating a tart food such as a lemon/lime or orange (or their juices) before a meal may help improve the flavour of meals.

- **If foods have strong smells:**

- Use a kitchen fan when cooking.
- Avoid stuffy rooms and sit by an open window.
- Cover drinks with a lid, use a ‘to-go’ cup or a straw to drink.
- Use a microwave, covered pots, or an outdoor barbecue.
- Order ‘take-out.
- Ask for help from family and friends to help prepare meals.
- Avoid foods that have a strong or unpleasant smell.

Try cold or room temperature foods such as:

- Milkshakes
- Cottage cheese and fruit
- Yogurt
- Cream cheese on bagel
- Chicken salad
- Cheese on crackers
- Ice-cream
- Puddings and custard
- Mixed bean salad

Other suggestions:

- Focus on colour, texture, smell and your taste memory of the food.
- Consider social surroundings. Some may find it helpful to eat at home before attending social events. Others might eat more while talking to friends and family.
- **Do not smoke.**
- **Avoid alcohol.** It can cause dry mouth and make taste changes worse.

- Consider food as medicine versus pleasure for the period when taste changes are at their worst.
- Consider eating with distraction or ‘mindless eating’ (for example, eating while watching TV or while having conversations)
- If you have a **“cotton mouth”** feeling in your mouth, try the following sour tasting foods. This can help to stimulate your taste buds and increase saliva:
 - Lemonade, ice-tea, juices, plain yogurt, or sour cream
 - Pickles
 - Sweet and sour sauce
 - Sugar free gums or tart candies
- If you have a dry mouth, try strategies from the Coping with Dry Mouth handout on the BC Cancer website.
- Ask a pharmacist about **other products or supplements** that may help with taste changes.

Follow up with your doctor or dietitian if:

- You have persistent taste changes that prevent you from being able to eat adequate amounts
- You have other side-effects such as nausea and vomiting that prevent you from eating and drinking
- You are losing weight without trying
- Your food selection has been limited for a long time; you may need to take a multivitamin/mineral supplement

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