



It is common for food to taste different during cancer treatment. It can happen to people having chemotherapy and to those having radiotherapy to the head and neck area.

## Why are these changes important?

Taste and smell are closely linked to food enjoyment. During cancer treatment, food that you usually like may not taste the same.

This can be a problem if it stops you eating enough food, as you may lose weight and not have enough energy.

It's important that you eat properly and don't lose weight during treatment. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you are having trouble eating.

## What changes will I get?

Changes to the flavour of food are different for everyone.

Taste can change in different ways:

- you may be sensitive to certain flavours
- sweet foods (e.g. chocolate) may taste too sweet
- food can taste like cardboard, straw or sand
- certain foods can taste bitter or metallic, or you can get a constant bitter or metallic taste in your mouth (this can be caused by **some** chemotherapy drugs).

Read the 'Tips to help with taste changes' section on the next page for more information about what you can do.

## Why do changes happen?

Cancer treatments can cause taste and smell changes in several ways. It can be because of:

- damage to the taste buds
- changes to the sense of smell
- changes to how the texture of food feels (touch).

These changes can be more noticeable if you are having radiation treatment to the head and neck area, or a combination of radiotherapy and chemotherapy treatments.

Usually the changes start during treatment and last for a short time after it finishes. They can last longer in some patients.

### ! Important:

- Drink enough water or fluid every day (8 cups or 2 litres of fluid unless you are on a fluid restricted diet).
- Eat a healthy well balanced diet (including 5 serves of vegetables and 2 serves of fruit each day).

**Talk to your doctor or nurse if taste or smell problems are stopping you from eating properly.**

## Tips to help with taste changes

### Food tastes bland

Use seasonings such as fresh herbs, lemon, garlic and sauces to give food a stronger flavour.

### Strong flavours are overpowering

Cut down on spices, carbonated drinks, mints or chewing gum. Choose food with less strong flavours instead.

### You go off meat

It is common to go off meat during treatment. As your body needs protein to cope with the demands of treatment, replace meat with other proteins, such as:

- cheese\*
- baked beans
- eggs
- kidney beans
- dairy foods\*
- nuts
- lentils or chick peas

*\*Check with your treating team if you can eat these foods while you are on treatment.*

### Food tastes like cardboard, straw or sand

Choose soft, moist foods to eat. Add some liquid (like gravy) to your food. Make sure you drink enough fluid so that your mouth doesn't get too dry. If you have a dry mouth, try products to stimulate or replace saliva – ask your dietitian or speech pathologist for more advice.

### Metallic taste in the mouth

Some foods can taste bitter or metallic, and some patients complain of a constant bitter or metallic taste in the mouth.

Try rinsing your mouth to see if this helps. If the taste is caused by certain foods or drink, avoid having them.

## Things to ask your doctor or nurse

- ✓ What mouthwashes should I use?
- ✓ How often should I see the dentist?

### Contact numbers:

Daytime: .....

Night/weekend: .....

## Common questions

### How long will it last?

Usually, these changes will last for the treatment period and for a short time after. You may notice that changes may become better or worse at certain points during the treatment cycle.

### What do I do about changes to smell?

If the smell of foods bothers you, try eating plainer, cold or room temperature foods. Get someone else to prepare the food if you can.

Sometimes smells can be referred into the mouth (e.g. from the back of the nose or throat). Regular mouth cleaning and mouth rinsing with salt water should help.

### Is there a cure for changes to taste or smell?

Unfortunately there are no cures for these changes, but usually they will resolve over time.

## Mouth care

The most useful thing you can do to help with changes in taste or smell is to take care of your mouth. Clean your teeth using a soft bristled toothbrush and rinse regularly with alcohol-free mouthwashes (see below).



## Mouthwashes

Rinse your mouth and dentures after you eat, or brush your teeth using either:

- 1/4 teaspoon of salt in 1 cup of warm water, or
- 1/4 teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda in 1 cup of warm water, or
- an alcohol-free mouthwash.

## Working together to lessen the impact of cancer

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