

Changes to taste or smell during cancer treatment

It is common for food to taste or smell different during cancer treatment.

What causes changes to taste and smell?

Certain cancer treatments can change your senses of taste and smell, including:

- radiation therapy to the head and neck
- surgery to the nose, throat or mouth
- chemotherapy
- targeted therapy
- immunotherapy.

Taste and smell can also be affected if you have:

- mouth problems such as sores, ulcers or a dry mouth
- nausea (feeling sick) or vomiting (throwing up)
- dehydration (not drinking enough fluids)
- dental problems.

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

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

Things to ask your doctor or nurse:

- What mouth wash should I use?
- How often should I see the dentist?

Contact numbers

Daytime: _____

Night/weekend: _____



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.

You might find:

- things don't smell like they used to
- some foods may have a strong smell
- you don't like certain flavours
- sweet foods (e.g. chocolate) may taste too sweet
- some foods may taste too salty
- food tastes like cardboard, straw or sand
- certain foods can taste bitter or metallic
- you have a constant bitter or metallic taste in your mouth (this can be caused by some chemotherapy).

These changes can affect your appetite, and you might lose weight or choose less healthy food and drinks.

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.

Tips to help with taste and smell changes

General advice

- Rinse your mouth before and after eating.
- Try foods and drinks you usually don't like.
- Eat when you are hungry and snack on healthy options.
- If you have a bad taste in your mouth that doesn't go away, try sucking on sugar-free lollies or mints.

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, fizzy drinks, mints or chewing gum.
- Choose foods with less strong flavours instead.
- Have food at room temperature, which can change the flavour.

You don't enjoy meat

It is common to stop enjoying red meat during treatment. As your body needs protein to cope with the demands of treatment, try other proteins like:

- chicken, fish* or tofu
- cheese*
- eggs
- beans
- protein shakes – try adding either yogurt, ice cream or fresh fruits
- nuts
- lentils and chickpeas.

**Check with your cancer care team if you can eat these foods while you are on treatment*



For information for patient and carers please scan the QR code.

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 (spit). Try sucking sugar-free mints or chewing gum.

You have a metallic taste in the mouth

- Use regular mouth rinses.
- Add a small amount of sugar or salt to your food.
- Eat oranges or lemons and pickled foods (unless you have a sore mouth).
- Add vinegar to foods or dressings (unless you have a sore mouth).
- Use plastic knives, forks and spoons.

The smell of food makes you sick

- Try eating plainer, cold or room temperature foods.
- Ask someone else to prepare your food if you can.
- Use an exhaust fan or open windows when cooking.
- Clean your mouth and rinse mouth with saltwater regularly.

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.

Mouthwashes

Rinse your mouth and dentures if you have them 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.