

Taste and Smell Alterations

Medical Management

Chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or cancer itself can change the way food tastes and smells to you. Food may taste bland, chalky, overly sweet, metallic, or have no taste at all. This can lead to a poor appetite and trouble eating as much as you should to maintain your health and strength. Please talk to your doctor or nurse for additional information about medical management of changed sense of taste and smell and poor appetite if you have questions about these issues.

Using Nutrition to Help Yourself

Even if food does not taste good, you can get the nutrition you need by choosing the right things to eat, avoiding food that may worsen your changed sense of taste and smell, and by carefully planning your eating schedule.

Nutrition Tips for Altered Sense of Taste and Smell

- If you cannot eat for more than a day because of an altered or changed sense of taste or smell, call your doctor or nurse right away.
- Follow the instructions your health care team gives you for best mouth care. Use any mouth care medications or solutions exactly as your doctor has prescribed.
- Avoid food odors. Stay away from the kitchen when food is being prepared. Ask friends and family to help you with this.
- If you have a metallic taste in your mouth, try plastic utensils.
- Try rinsing your mouth with cool black or green tea, lightly salted water, or baking soda and water to “clear” your taste buds before eating.
- Stick with food that has a low odor and a short cooking time. When drinking liquids, use a cup with a lid or cover to further reduce odors.
- Set some times to eat, such as every one-half to one hour. Be sure to have at least one or two bites of food at each set time. Eating often is important, while quantity and type of food are less important.
- Try flavoring your food with tart flavors, such as lemon, citrus, vinegar, and pickled items. Do not do this if you have a sore mouth or throat.
- Try flavoring food with different or unusual flavors, such as basil, oregano, rosemary, tarragon, mustard, catsup, or mint.

What to Eat and Drink

- Try food that has low odor and a short cooking time. Examples include scrambled eggs, French toast, pancakes, oatmeal, cream of wheat, cold cereal, and shakes and smoothies.
- Marinate (soak) and cook meats in sweet juices, fruit, or dressings. For example, try sweet and sour pork, chicken with honey glaze, or beef with Italian dressing.
- Try cold food that does not have as much odor, such as ice pops, yogurt, frozen yogurt, frozen fruit, cold hard-boiled eggs, juices and fruit nectars, cottage cheese, and smoothies and shakes.
- Try frozen fruit, such as frozen grapes or frozen watermelon wedges.
- If sweet things don't taste good to you, try sour, tart, or mildly bitter food and drinks, such as a smoothie flavored with frozen cranberries or lemon and lime or a liquid supplement, such as Ensure or Boost flavored with 1 to 2 teaspoons of finely ground, decaffeinated coffee.
- Use liquid nutrition products, such as Ensure or Boost to fill in the nutrition gaps if you aren't eating well.



What to Avoid

- Food with strong odors and “long-cooking” items, such as stews, casseroles, crock pot recipes, and baked meat or fish.
- Rich desserts, such as candy, cakes, pies, chocolate, and cheesecake.
- Fatty, greasy, fried, and spicy food.
- Sugar substitutes, such as Nutrasweet, Splenda, mannitol, and sorbitol, which may have an unpleasant after-taste for you.
- If you do not feel well, avoid your favorite foods.