

CANCER TREATMENT & CHANGES IN TASTE OR SMELL

PATIENT/FAMILY INFORMATION SHEET

Overview

Your sense of taste or smell may change during your illness or treatment. Foods, especially meat or other high-protein foods, can begin to have bitter or metallic taste. Many foods will have less taste. Chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or the cancer itself may cause these problems. Problems with your teeth and gums can also affect the way foods taste. For most people, changes in taste and smell will go away when treatment is completed.

What are taste changes?

Taste changes are an alteration in how you perceive flavors. The four main tastes that our taste buds perceive are sweet, sour, bitter and salty. Any or all of these may be altered.

Why do things taste different?

Changes in how things taste commonly occur as a side effect of chemotherapy, as well as radiation therapy for head and neck cancers. Taste changes may be caused by damage to cells in the mouth by chemotherapy or by the spread of chemotherapy drugs in the tissue of the mouth.

Taste changes may also be caused by radiation damage to the salivary glands, resulting in a dry mouth. Saliva contributes to our sense of taste by mixing with food, which helps to stimulate the taste buds on our tongue. When there is less saliva, the food does not come into contact with the taste buds as easily and there may be changes in how we perceive the four tastes.

How will things taste after chemotherapy treatment?

It is common to have an increased sensitivity to sour and bitter taste, or to have a "metallic" taste in your mouth. Also you may be less sensitive to sweet foods causing foods to taste less sweet than they use to. Food may simply taste bland. The length of time that these changes last is different for everyone and depends on your treatment. However, taste changes usually resolve in 2-3 months.

Why is it important to address taste and smell changes?

While changes in how things taste may seem like a minor side effect of cancer treatment, these changes may cause you to lose your appetite, making it difficult for you to get adequate nutrition which could result in weight loss. Weight loss is a common complication of cancer and cancer treatment and can compromise your health and well-being.

Is there a treatment for changes in taste or smell?

There is no foolproof way to prevent changes to your sense of taste or smell because each person is affected differently by illness and treatment. However, the tips below should help if you have this problem.

- Rinse mouth with water before eating.
- Eat small frequent meals and healthy snacks.
- Choose and prepare foods that look and smell good to you or allow others to help in food preparation.
- If red meat, such as beef, tastes or smell strange, try poultry, mild-tasting fish, eggs or cheese instead.
- Help the flavor of meat, chicken, or fish by marinating it in sweet fruit juices, sweet wine, Italian dressing, or sweet and sour sauce.
- Use small amounts of flavoring seasonings, such as basil, oregano or rosemary.
- Use plastic utensils if food tastes like metal.
- Use sugar free mints, lemon drops or chewing gum to mask the bitter or metallic taste
- Try tart foods, such as citrus fruits or lemonade, unless you have mouth soreness.
- If smells bother you, try serving foods at room temperature.
- Visit the dentist to rule out dental problems that may affect the taste or smell of foods.
- Ask your dentist or doctor about special mouthwashes and good mouth care.
- Consult with a registered dietician.

For more information on change in taste or smell speak with your doctor or nurse. Additional information can also be found at:

American Cancer Society at www.cancer.org,

National Cancer Institute at www.cancer.gov

The National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship at www.canceradvocacy.org

For more Patient Education Fact Sheets, see the Greenwich Hospital web set at www.greenhosp.org and click on Patients & Visitors, then Patient Education.