

Taste changes

Food has the capacity to bring comfort and joy into our lives, even in the middle of painful circumstances. Nourishing, healing, and joyful connections with food empowers us to live happier, healthier lives. There are several probable causes of taste changes related to cancer and its treatment. Understanding the causes can help you relieve or manage these changes. After all, going through life with cancer is not just about surviving; it is about *thriving*.

Taste changes are common side effect of chemotherapy. Affecting about half of the people receiving chemotherapy. This usually stops about 3 to 4 weeks after treatment ends.

Radiation therapy to the neck or head can harm the taste buds/salivary glands, and sense of smell. Taste changes caused by radiation treatment usually start to improve 3 weeks to 2 months after treatment ends.

Some other causes of taste changes can include:

- Surgery to the nose, throat, or mouth
- Dry mouth
- Damage to the nerves involved in tasting
- Mouth sores, dental or gum problems
- Nausea and vomiting
- Dehydration
- Allergies
- Pain medications
- Antibiotics
- Gastric reflux

The following are tips to deal with and manage taste changes:

- Choose foods that smell and taste good, even if the food is not familiar.
- If you're sensitive to smells, get rid of cooking odors. Use an exhaust fan, cook on an outdoor grill, or buy precooked foods. Cold or room-temperature foods smell less.
- Eat cold or frozen foods, which may taste better than hot foods. Avoid cold foods if receiving chemotherapy with oxaliplatin (Eloxatin) drug due to sensitivity to cold.
- Use plastic utensils and glass cookware to lessen the metallic taste.
- Try sugar-free gum or hard candies with flavors such as mint, lemon, or orange. These flavors can help mask a bitter or metallic taste in the mouth.
- Avoid red meats if they do not taste good. Try other protein sources like poultry, eggs, fish, peanut butter, beans, or dairy products.
- Marinate meats in fruit juices, sweet wines, salad dressings, or other sauces.
- Flavor foods with herbs, spices, sugar, lemon, or sauces.
- Avoid eating 1 to 2 hours before and up to 3 hours after chemotherapy. This helps prevent food aversions caused by nausea and vomiting.

- Rinse mouth with salt and baking soda solution before meals. It may help stop bad tastes in the mouth.
 - Mix ½ teaspoon of salt and ½ teaspoon of baking soda in 1 cup of warm water.
- Keep a clean and healthy mouth by brushing frequently (using a soft toothbrush) and flossing daily. Do not floss if your platelet counts are low.
- Stay hydrated by drinking water, tea, and other liquids. Sip fluids throughout the day to give your organs and bodily systems the water they need to work properly. Vegetables and soups can also help keep your body hydrated.
- Eat 4 to 6 smaller meals, instead of the typical 3 larger meals, especially if you are having problems with digestion.

If you are having specific taste issues, here are some ideas to help:

- **Things have a metallic taste.** Add a little sweetener, like grade A dark maple syrup or agave nectar, and a squeeze of lemon. You could also try adding fat, such as nut cream or butter.
- **Things taste too sweet.** Start by adding 6 drops of lemon or lime juice. Keep adding it in small increments until the sweet taste becomes muted.
- **Things taste too salty.** Add ¼ teaspoon of lemon juice. It erases the taste of salt.
- **Things taste too bitter.** Add a little sweetener, like maple syrup or agave nectar.
- **Everything tastes like cardboard.** Add more sea salt until the flavor of the dish moves toward the front of the mouth. A spritz of fresh lemon juice also helps.
- **You are having trouble swallowing or dealing with mouth sores.** Add fat, such as nut cream, to your food. Eat blended or pureed foods, like blended soups, smoothies, and granitas. Stay away from ginger, curry, red pepper flakes, and other strong spices.

General tips to keep in mind to create a better relationship with food:

- Limit or avoid highly processed foods, reduce many added sugars, unhealthy fats, additives, and colorings. Limiting or avoiding certain foods does not mean that you are sentenced to eating joyless and flavorless foods.
- Eat a variety of foods, including vegetables, fruits, lean proteins, beans, legumes, nuts, seeds, whole grains, and healthy fats.
- Stick with plants. Whenever plants are at the center of the plate—and that includes herbs and spices—you cannot lose.
- Cooked vegetables may be easier to eat than raw vegetables. However, both raw and cooked veggies are beneficial.
- Add herbs and spices to both food and drinks, and the payout will be big flavor and nutrients.
- Be prepared and stock your pantry with real food. Think of your pantry, fridge, and freezer as your culinary medicine chest.
- Make cooking a part of your everyday life. Get comfortable in your kitchen, cook, and eat a meal with friends and family to nourish your body, mind, and soul.

- Pack up a meal- go on a picnic, eat outside.
- Focus on what you *can* eat rather than on what you are giving up. There are many beautiful and delicious foods you *can* still enjoy.

Taste changes can make it hard for some people to eat healthy foods and maintain their weight. If you are struggling with this side effect, please discuss it with your healthcare team so we can help.