

Understanding Taste and Smell Changes

A guide for people affected by cancer

This fact sheet has been prepared to help you understand more about how cancer and cancer treatments can affect your senses of taste and smell.

Why taste and smell are important

The senses of taste and smell combined with touch (the way food feels in the mouth) all work together to help us experience flavour. When we eat, our mouth and nose send signals to the brain so we can taste, smell and feel the texture of the food.

Changes to your senses of smell and taste can affect what you are able to eat and drink as well as what you want to eat and drink. These changes can lead to loss of appetite and weight loss, which could mean you are not getting the nutrition your body needs. Eating well before, during and after cancer treatment can keep your energy up, improve your mood, help you cope with treatment side effects and aid recovery. Talk to your doctor or nurse if you are having trouble eating.

How cancer can affect taste and smell

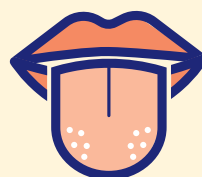
Some types of cancer and cancer treatment can change your sense of taste and smell. Cancer-related causes of changes to taste and smell include:

- cancers in the head and neck area
- radiation therapy to the head and neck
- surgery to the nose, throat or mouth
- drug therapies including chemotherapy, targeted therapy and immunotherapy
- side effects of treatment, such as nausea, dehydration, or mouth sores and dryness
- medicines (e.g. antibiotics, pain medicines).

Changes to taste and smell you might experience

Many people find that cancer and cancer treatment can affect taste and smell. These side effects will vary from person to person, but some common changes include:

Taste



- food has no taste
- food tastes different than it did before cancer treatment
- you have a metallic taste in your mouth, or food tastes metallic
- some drinks, like tea, coffee, beer and wine, may taste bitter
- sweet foods, such as chocolate or sugary cereals, taste too sweet
- certain tastes make you feel sick

Smell



- you find it difficult to smell food – or lose your sense of smell – which may make it harder to taste
- you are more sensitive to smells
- food smells different than it used to
- certain smells make you feel sick
- you smell things that other people do not



It is common to dislike the taste of red meat during some cancer treatments. Eating enough protein is important during treatment and recovery as it helps keep muscles strong. Other high protein foods are chicken, tofu, cheese, eggs, nuts, dairy foods, beans, lentils and protein shakes.

The impact of treatments on taste and smell

Radiation therapy and drug therapies such as chemotherapy, targeted therapy and immunotherapy can damage cells and nerves responsible for smell and taste. Usually these changes are temporary but sometimes the changes may last longer or be permanent (see page 4).

Cancer treatments can also cause conditions that affect taste and smell. These include:

Dry mouth (xerostomia) – This is when your mouth produces less saliva (spit) and your mouth seems dry or your saliva is thick, sticky or stringy. Saliva helps your tastebuds recognise flavours, so a dry mouth may affect how food and drinks taste. Having a dry mouth over a long period of time can also cause mouth infections or tooth decay. Talk to your doctor, nurse or dentist if you have a dry mouth, as they can give you tips to help reduce any discomfort.

Oral mucositis – This is inflammation of the lining of your mouth, and can be caused by cancer treatments such as chemotherapy, radiation therapy and targeted therapy. Oral mucositis can lead to mouth ulcers that may cause pain and discomfort when eating and drinking. Your cancer treatment team, doctor or dentist can give you medicines to reduce the discomfort when you eat and drink.

If you have a dry mouth, mucositis or don't feel like eating, talk to your doctor. It's also a good idea to visit a dentist for a check-up before you start cancer treatment. Let them know about your treatment so they can help you care for your mouth and teeth.

► See our *Mouth Health and Cancer Treatment* fact sheet.

“During treatment, I developed an active sense of smell. I hated certain smells and did all I could to avoid them. My mouth felt very dry, which made food taste unappetising. Adding extra sauce helped.” HELEN

Tips for common issues

Taste

Food has no flavour

- Add seasonings such as fresh herbs, lemon, ginger, garlic, honey, chilli, soy sauce, Worcestershire sauce, pickles and marinades.
- If your mouth is sore, avoid acidic or spicy sauces or seasonings.

Flavours are overpowering

- Choose foods that do not have strong flavours.
- Avoid using spices such as chilli.
- Avoid fizzy drinks, mints or chewing gum.

You have a bitter or metallic taste in your mouth

- Nibble on moist fruit, suck boiled sweets or have small sips of flavoured drinks; ginger flavours may be helpful.
- Use plastic utensils or wooden chopsticks.
- Add vinegar or the juice of lemons, limes and oranges to drinks or food (if you don't have a sore mouth).

Food seems too dry or tastes like “cardboard”

- Add liquids like gravy or sauces.
- Eat moist foods like soups, smoothies and casseroles.
- Keep up your water intake so your mouth does not get too dry.
- Chew gum or suck lollies to stimulate saliva (spit).
- Sip fluids during meals.

Smell

Increased sensitivity to smells

- Stay out of the kitchen when food is being prepared.
- Ask friends and family to cook for you or buy nutritious prepared meals if possible.
- Choose bland, cold or room-temperature foods.
- Use exhaust fans, cover pots with lids or cook outdoors.
- Avoid strong-smelling foods or ingredients.

Some smells can make you feel sick

- Speak with your treatment team, who can suggest ways to help.

Some smells cause a bad taste in your mouth

- Rinse away the taste by drinking water or block your nose to minimise the smell.

Managing taste and smell changes

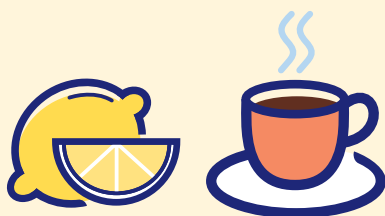
Some cancer treatments can change how food tastes and smells. Here are some easy ways to help you deal with these changes and stay healthy.



Keep a record of any changes

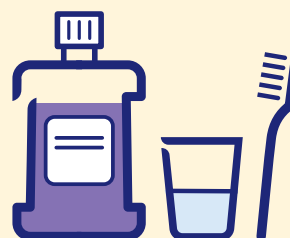
List the time of day, how far from the start or end of your treatment cycle you are, and what food and drink you are having. This will help the treatment team work out the causes and suggest ways to manage the side effects.

Experiment with different foods and drinks



Treatment can change how things taste and smell, making some foods less appealing. This could cause you to miss out on important nutrients. Finding tasty and healthy options is key.

Keep your mouth clean and fresh



Clean your teeth with a soft toothbrush after each meal, and regularly rinse your mouth with salt water. This can help ease any bad taste you have in your mouth.

Eat little and often



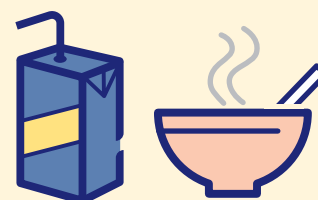
If you have lost your appetite or feel sick, try having smaller, more frequent meals or snacks that are high in protein.

Get help for feeling sick



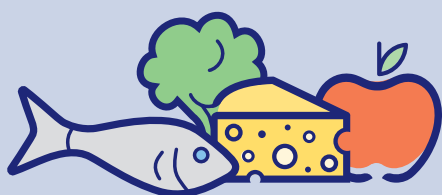
Talk to your specialist or GP if you are experiencing nausea as they may be able to prescribe a medicine to help.

Use a straw



Use a straw to bypass tastebuds. This can help you drink nutrient-rich foods like soups or healthy drinks without tasting them as much.

Why good nutrition is important



Nutrition refers to the food and drink you need for your health and wellbeing. Good nutrition is especially important after a cancer diagnosis as it can help you feel better during treatment and recover more quickly.

Changes to your enjoyment of food can lead you to eat and drink less and may cause malnutrition. If you are eating and drinking less, notice significant weight loss or experience changes in bowel movements, talk to your doctor or nurse. They may suggest you see a health professional called a dietitian, who can help you find ways to enjoy food and also meet your nutritional needs.

► For more information see our *Nutrition for People Living with Cancer* booklet. To find a dietitian near you, go to dietitiansaustralia.org.au/find-dietitian.

How long do changes last?

Most changes will get better with time, but it can depend on what type of treatment you have and where the cancer is in your body. Your doctor will be able to tell you how long your sense of smell and taste are likely to be affected. You may also be advised to try different flavours to help your sense of taste to recover.

If you have chemotherapy, you might notice that symptoms can vary during a single treatment cycle. People who have chemotherapy without other treatments will often find that taste and smell problems improve about 2–3 months after treatment has ended, and most people recover completely within 6 months.

People who have radiation therapy to the head or neck area may find their senses of taste and smell recover a couple of months after treatment ends. Some people have longer-term or even permanent changes to taste and smell, especially if they experience ongoing issues with dry mouth.

Question checklist

Asking your doctor or dietitian questions will help you manage any taste or smell changes:

- How will I know if I'm getting the right nutrition?
- How can I reduce nausea?
- Should I see a dentist before treatment starts?
- Will my sense of smell/sense of taste return to normal? If so, when?
- Can you refer me to a dietitian?

Where to get help and information

Call Cancer Council 13 11 20 for more information about changes to taste and smell. Our experienced health professionals can listen to your concerns, link you with local services, and send you our free booklets. You can also visit your local Cancer Council website:

ACT	actcancer.org
NSW	cancercouncil.com.au
NT	cancer.org.au/nt
QLD	cancerqld.org.au
SA	cancersa.org.au
TAS	cancer.org.au/tas
VIC	cancervic.org.au
WA	cancerwa.asn.au
Australia	cancer.org.au

Other useful websites

You can find many useful resources online, but not all websites are reliable. These websites are good sources of support and information.

Cancer Australia	canceraustralia.gov.au
Cancer Council Online Community	cancercouncil.com.au/OC
eviQ (cancer treatment information)	eviq.org.au
Dietitians Australia	dietitiansaustralia.org.au
Australian Dietary Guidelines	eatforhealth.gov.au

Acknowledgements

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Note to reader

Always consult your doctor about matters that affect your health. This fact sheet is intended as a general introduction and is not a substitute for professional medical, legal or financial advice.

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Cancer Council acknowledges Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and recognises the continuing connection to lands, waters and communities. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and to Elders past, present and emerging.

