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Taste and Smell Changes

Certain types of cancer and its treatment can change your senses of taste and smell. Common causes include:

- Certain kinds of tumors in the head and neck area
- Radiation to the head and neck area
- Certain kinds of chemotherapy and targeted therapy
- Mouth sores or dryness due to certain treatments
- Some medications used to help with side effects or other non-cancer problems

What to look for

Taste and smell changes can often affect your appetite. They might be described as:

- Not being able to smell things other people do, or noticing a reduced sense of smell.
- Noticing things smell different or certain smells are stronger
- Having a bitter or metallic taste in the mouth.
- Food tasting too salty or sweet.
- Food not having much taste.

Usually these changes go away after treatment ends, but sometimes they can last a long time.

What the patient and caregiver can do

- Try using plastic forks, spoons, and knives and glass cups and plates.

- Try sugar-free lemon drops, gum, or mints.
- Try fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables instead of canned.
- Season foods with tart flavors. Use lemon wedges, lemonade, citrus fruits, vinegar, and pickled foods. (If you have a sore mouth or throat, do not do this.)
- Try flavoring foods with new tastes or spices (onion, garlic, chili powder, basil, oregano, rosemary, tarragon, BBQ sauce, mustard, ketchup, or mint).
- Counter a salty taste with added sweeteners, a sweet taste with added lemon juice and salt, and a bitter taste with added sweeteners.
- Rinse your mouth with a baking soda, salt, and water mouthwash before eating to help foods taste better. (Mix 1 teaspoon salt and 1 teaspoon baking soda in 4 cups of water. Shake well before swishing and spitting.)
- Keep your mouth clean and brush your teeth to help ease bad tastes.
- Serve foods cold or at room temperature. This can decrease the foods' tastes and smells, making them easier to tolerate.
- Freeze fruits like cantaloupe, grapes, oranges, and watermelon, and eat them as frozen treats.
- Eat fresh vegetables. They may be more tempting than canned or frozen ones.
- Try marinating meats to make them tender.
- If red meats taste strange, try other protein-rich foods like chicken, fish, beans or peas, tofu, nuts, seeds, eggs, or cheese.
- Blend fresh fruits into shakes, ice cream, or yogurt.
- To reduce smells, cover beverages and drink through a straw; choose foods that don't need to be cooked; and avoid eating in rooms that are stuffy or too warm.