

Cancer-Related Taste and Smell Changes

Cancer and cancer treatments can cause changes in your senses of taste and smell.

How foods taste and smell can differ from one day to the next, and these changes might affect your appetite or how much you are eating.

Some general tips include:

- Try small portions
- Experiment with new seasonings to change or add flavor
- If the first few bites have flavor, but the rest don't, try switching from one food to the next every few bites
- Try a wide variety of foods and new foods to stimulate taste buds
- Speak with your doctor or dietitian about taking a multivitamin with minerals supplement until you can taste and eat normally

Online Resources

[Taste Changes Recipes | Cook for Your Life](#)

– Fred Hutch

[The Power of Yum!](#)

– Rebecca Katz

Tips for managing changes – try these solutions when your taste changes.

When Foods Taste Bland or have an “Off” Taste

- Add herbs, spices, lemon, vinegar, or strongly flavored sauces and condiments to season foods
 - Fresh herbs have a more intense flavor than dried ones. Experiment with basil, cilantro, mint, etc.
 - Try spice blends such as Cajun, Italian, or Tuscan
 - For sodium-free options, try Mrs. Dash or Trader Joe's 21-Seasoning Salute
- Select fresh vegetables. They may be more flavorful than canned or frozen
- Choose foods with tart flavors like lemon wedges, or citrus fruits, Avoid these acidic foods if you have a sore mouth or throat
- Use marinades for meats to change the flavor or add sauces such as teriyaki or toppings such as chutneys
- Add ketchup, salsa or hot sauce to potatoes and eggs
- Put bacon bits, ham, onions or toasted nuts into noodles, casseroles, salads, potatoes, and sandwiches

For Bitter, Acidic, or Metallic Tastes

- Eat sweet fruits like cantaloupe or watermelon with meals
- Drink sweet or sour beverages like lemonade, apple juice, cranberry juice, or sweet tea. Add lemon juice or flavorings to water
- Use strongly flavored spices or seasonings like onion, garlic, chili powder, basil, mustard, ketchup, or mint
- Use plastic or bamboo utensils to reduce the sense of a metal taste in the mouth
- Choose protein foods like chicken, eggs, tofu, dairy foods, nuts, or beans, instead of beef or pork
- Add a little sweet to foods, particularly with real maple syrup
- Use sugar-free lemon drops, gum, or mints to improve the taste in your mouth

See Other Side...



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Tips for managing changes, continued

For Salty Taste

- Choose foods that are naturally sweet like fruits, tomatoes, carrots, sweet potatoes, and yogurt
 - Use low-sodium products and avoid using salt in recipes
 - Adding a little citrus to your meals can help to mask the salty flavor
 - Avoid dining out as these foods tend to be saltier
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For Sweet Taste

- Choose bland or sour flavors
 - Dilute juices or serve them over ice
 - Choose vegetables rather than fruits
 - A dash of salt can tone down foods that taste too sweet
 - Try adding squeezed lemon to foods to overcome the sweet taste
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When Smells Are Bothersome

- Serve foods cold or at room temperature. Hot foods produce more of an aroma
 - Choose foods that do not need to be cooked like smoothies, sandwiches, cottage cheese, yogurt, puddings, nut butters, and fruit
 - Avoid foods with strong smells, like fish, onions, garlic, and cabbage
 - Avoid the kitchen during meal preparation and avoid cooking methods that take a long time, like meals prepared in a slow cooker
 - Eat in cool, well-ventilated rooms that do not have any strong smells
 - If beverages have unpleasant smells, place a lid on an open cup and drink through a straw
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Visual appeal

Increasing the visual appeal of foods and meals is another technique to make foods more appetizing. Try the following:

- Arrange small portions of several foods on attractive plates
 - Garnish your plate with fruit slices, parsley or paprika
 - Vary the color and texture of foods for each meal
 - Place flowers on the table
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Mouth care

- Good oral care is important to keep your mouth clean, healthy, and tasting fresh
 - Brush your teeth regularly; after meals and before bed
 - Rinse your mouth frequently with a mixture of: ½-1 teaspoons of salt, 1 teaspoon of baking soda, 1 quart (4 cups) lukewarm water
 - Swishing your mouth with carbonated water after a meal can clear out bad tastes
 - Try chewing fresh herbs, such as basil or mint, or seeds, such as fennel or cardamom
 - Commercial mouthwashes may contain alcohol, which can have a drying effect. Ask your doctor or dentist for alternatives or prescription mouthwash options.
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Additional tips

- If struggling with appetite, try to eat something soon after waking up and get yourself on an eating schedule throughout the day
- Use an alarm clock to remind yourself to eat if your appetite is not kicking in
- Use oral nutrition supplements (such as Orgain, Kate Farms, Boost, Ensure, Carnation Breakfast Essentials, Enu, etc), milkshakes or homemade smoothies to increase your intake if your food portions are too small.

Adapted from the 2021 Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics Taste and Smell Changes