

Tips to help you eat when you have taste and smell changes

For people with cancer

This booklet will give you information about:

- causes of taste and smell change
- how to keep your mouth clean
- tips to help with taste and smell changes
- tips if your food tastes metallic, bitter, too sweet, salty, or bland
- how to eat enough if food tastes bad
- where to find recipes.



Why do I have changes to my taste and smell?

Many things can cause changes to your taste and smell when you are living with cancer. Common causes include:

- cancer in the head or neck
- cancer treatment, like radiation or surgery to the head and neck, some chemotherapy drugs, and medications
- mouth sores, dry mouth, thick saliva, or teeth and gum problems.

People often say that food:

- tastes metallic, bitter, too sweet, or salty
- tastes bland, has no taste, or all tastes the same
- tastes “bad”
- has no smell or a very strong smell.

These changes can make you not want to eat. It is important to keep eating well. **Get enough nutrition. This will help you heal and get better faster.**

Most people find taste and smell changes get better after treatment ends. This can take many weeks or months. Some changes in taste may be permanent depending on your treatment.

The booklet can help make eating food more enjoyable.

How do I keep my mouth clean?

Cleaning your mouth helps get rid of bad tastes so food can taste better. It also helps prevent infections.

- **Brush your teeth, tongue and/or dentures** with a soft toothbrush and gentle toothpaste after you eat and before bed. Continue to floss as usual. Talk to your health-care team if your gums bleed when you brush or floss.
- **Rinse your mouth before and after you eat** with bland mouth rinse. Rinse your mouth every 1-2 hours if it has a bad taste, it feels dry, or you have thick saliva. To make your own mouth rinse, use:
 - 1 tsp. (5 ml) salt
 - 1 tsp. (5 ml) baking soda
 - 4 cups (1000 ml) water.
- Store your mouth rinse at room temperature and make a new batch every day.
- Avoid store bought mouth washes, as they may have alcohol or flavouring that can dry out your mouth.
- **Keep your mouth and lips moist.**
- **Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about medication (drug) options** if you have a dry mouth or pain when you swallow. Take the recommended medications as directed to get the most benefit.

Tips to help with taste and smell changes

- **Choose foods that look and smell good to you.** This can mean you eat the same foods every day.
- **Try new foods and recipes.** If food tastes bad, try it again after 2 weeks. It is normal for your taste buds to change.
- **Eat foods that you need to chew less,** like soft foods, smoothies, and soups.
- **Eat foods at different temperatures.** Flavours are stronger in warm or hot foods. Cold or room temperature foods are usually less flavourful.
- **Eat a small meal or snack every 2-3 hours.** The first few bites of food may taste normal.
- **Suck on hard, sugar-free candies or mints, chew gum, or sip on mint or ginger herbal tea** to get rid of a bad taste in your mouth.
- **Stay hydrated.** Dehydration can make your mouth dry, your saliva thick, and changes to your taste worse. Sip liquids with your meals and throughout the day. Try to drink 9 to 12 cups (2.2 – 3L) of liquids every day. Anything you drink in a day, like water, milk, tea, and soup, is a liquid.
- **If water tastes bad,** add sliced fresh fruit, a splash of fruit juice, mint, or drink crystals.

- **If your mouth is dry:**
 - avoid or have less drinks with caffeine and alcohol
 - add sauce, gravy, or butter to make food easier to swallow
 - suck on xylitol-containing mints/candies (like X-pur mints®) to create saliva.
- **If you have mouth sores or pain with swallowing,** avoid mint, bubbly drinks, very hot, very cold, acidic, spicy, rough, and crispy foods.
- **If smell is the problem:**
 - eat foods that do not need to be cooked, like sandwiches, cold breakfast cereal, or yogurt
 - eat cold or room temperature foods
 - cover drinks and use a straw
 - ask your friends and family to cook food when you are not in the kitchen
 - try not to eat in rooms that are too warm or stuffy
 - use a fan or open the window when you cook
 - order prepared food or take-out instead of cooking.

Some tips if your food tastes...

Metallic

- Try meatless protein foods like legumes (dried beans, peas, and lentils), yogurt, eggs, tofu, nut butters, and hummus.
- Add seasoning, like herbs, spices, or lemon juice, to meat, poultry, and fish to change the flavour.
- Eat meat, poultry, and fish with a flavourful dip, sauce, or a tart (sour) side, like cranberry sauce, kimchi, mint jelly, sauerkraut, pickled vegetables, chutney, or lemon wedge.
- Try tart sauces like plain yogurt, sour cream, tzatziki, labneh, or raita if you have mouth sores.
- Use plastic or wooden forks, spoons, knives, or chopsticks instead of metal utensils.
- Eat fresh or frozen foods instead of canned.
- Cook food in glass instead of metal pots, pans, and baking dishes. Store food in glass or plastic containers.
- Suck on sugar-free lemon candies or mints, or chew gum after a meal.

Bitter

- Pick sweet foods, or add a small amount of sugar, honey, or maple syrup to foods and drinks.
- Eat meals with sweet sauces like ketchup, applesauce, barbecue sauce, hoisin sauce, plum sauce, sweet chutney, fruit compote, marmalade or jelly, oyster sauce, sweet relish, or sweet chili sauce.
- Eat bland foods, like bread, oatmeal, congee, noodles, rice, tofu, peanut butter, milk, and milk products.
- Try ginger ale, sweetened mint tea, or sugar-free mint gum or candy after your meal.

Too sweet

- Choose salty, tart, or sour foods to balance the sweetness.
- Eat meals with tart foods like kimchi, vinegar, ponzu sauce, mustard, pickled vegetables, lemon juice, plain yogurt, sour cream, tzatziki, labneh, or raita.
- Add milk or soy milk to creamy drinks and smoothies.
- Add water or soda water to juices, lemonade, and iced tea.
- Add a pinch of salt to sweet foods like puddings, ice cream, smoothies, or milkshakes.

Salty

- Buy low-salt or sodium-reduced products.
- Do not add salt when you cook. Use herbs and seasoning like thyme, parsley, oregano, cumin, cilantro, dill, basil, garlic, and ginger to add flavour.
- Add a teaspoon of sugar or honey to salty foods like soups, gravies, and casseroles. This makes foods taste less salty, but not sweet.
- Eat meals with sweet sauces like ketchup, applesauce, barbecue sauce, hoisin sauce, plum sauce, sweet chutney, fruit compote, marmalade, jelly, oyster sauce, sweet relish, or sweet chili sauce.

Bland

- Eat food with strong flavours like aged cheeses, fermented or pickled foods, marinated meats, curries, and stews.
- Add extra flavour to your food with spices, seasonings, marinades, and strong flavoured ingredients like mustard, shrimp paste, horseradish, gochujang, tamarind, chimichurri, fish sauce, harissa, pesto, pico de gallo, sun-dried tomatoes, and garlic.
- Try tart foods, like vinegar, lemon, and pickles, before or with your meal to wake up your taste buds.

How do I eat enough if food tastes bad?

Your body uses calories for energy. All food has calories. Some foods have more calories than others. Eat enough calories to keep your weight the same.

Protein helps to build muscle and repair healthy cells that are damaged during treatment (chemotherapy, radiation, or surgery). Eat a high-protein food at each meal and snack.

Eat enough calories and protein to help you stay strong, heal and get better after treatment.

Tips to eat more calories and protein

- **Make every bite count.** Choose high-calorie and protein foods most often.
- **Eat a small meal or snack every 2-3 hours.**
- **Eat the foods that taste best.** It is ok if every meal is not nutritionally balanced. Eating something is better than skipping a meal.
- **Eat a protein food at every meal and snack.** Protein foods include meat, fish, poultry, eggs, legumes, nuts, seeds, soy milk, tofu, milk, and milk products.
- **Try meatless protein foods, if you do not like the taste of meat.**
- **Add extra oil, butter, or margarine when you cook.** Toss to coat vegetables, noodles, rice, and other grains. Stir into soups, smoothies, congee, mashed potatoes, and hot cereal.

- **Choose higher-fat dairy products** like 3.25% whole milk, full-fat yogurt, and ice cream. Finish soups, sauce, and desserts with cream.
- **Choose liquids that give you energy** like milk, smoothies, soups, and fruit juice. Drink liquids between meals so you do not fill up as quick.
- **Try nutrition supplements** for more calories and protein. If you do not like creamy supplements, try juice supplements like Boost® Fruit Flavoured Beverage and Ensure® Clear. If you have a sore mouth or throat, try cooling supplements like Boost® Soothe.
- **Stir protein powder or skim milk powder** into soft foods like congee, mashed potatoes, hot cereal, or soup. Add to drinks like milk, smoothies, lassis, or milk shakes.
- **Distract yourself while you eat.** Talk with family or friends, watch TV, or listen to music instead of focusing on the food.

Where can I find recipes to help with taste and smell changes?

These websites have recipes for people with taste and smell changes:

- Odette Cancer Centre: sunnybrook.ca/cancernutrition
- A Pain in the Neck: apainintheneck.org/
- World Cancer Research Fund and Life Kitchen: wcrf-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Flavour-and-Nutrition-recipe-book.pdf

Note: This is not a full list of brands or products. The Odette Cancer Centre does not recommend one brand over another. Talk to your dietitian if you need help understanding how this information applies to you.

If you are a patient at the Odette Cancer Centre and you would like more nutrition information, please visit the Patient & Family Support office in TG 230 (T-wing, ground floor, room 230), call 416-480-4623, or visit sunnybrook.ca/cancernutrition

This resource should be used for information and does not replace medical advice. For questions, concerns, or additional information, contact your dietitian. This resource is for personal use only.



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