

## **What to Eat and Drink When You Have Taste and Smell Changes**

This handout offers information on what to eat and drink when you have taste and smell changes during and after cancer treatments.

### **How to manage dry mouth:**

Dry mouth can be a side effect of the medications you are taking. It can be hard to taste your food if your mouth is very dry.

- Use a mouth rinse before and after eating. See 'mouth care' below for more information.
- Drink less fluids with alcohol and caffeine in them.
- Do not smoke.
- Use a cool mist humidifier in your room at night.
- Suck on sour candies, ice chips, citrus fruits, xylitol-based lozenges such as Xylimelts, or chew sugar-free gum.
- Choose soft, moist foods like yogurt, scrambled eggs, or canned fruit.
- Increase moisture by adding sauces, gravies, salad dressings, or oil to foods.
- Take a drink with each bite of food.
- Eat frozen fruit or popsicles between meals.
- Talk to your healthcare team about using gels, sprays, or artificial saliva products.

### **How to manage taste changes:**

- Try new foods and drinks to find flavours you enjoy.
- Use a mouth rinse before and after eating. See the information on 'mouth care' below for more information.
- Make a list of foods that taste good to you. Eat these foods more often. Do not eat foods that do not taste right to you.
- Choose foods that need less chewing. They will be in your mouth for less time if they cause a bad taste in your mouth.
- Do not smoke cigarettes or use tobacco.
- Eat in a comfortable setting.

### **Mouth care**

Good mouth care can help with dry mouth and taste changes. Use a homemade mouth rinse (swish and spit) before and after you eat. This will help lessen any bad taste in your mouth. Make a mouth rinse using 1 teaspoon (5 ml) of salt and 1 teaspoon (5 ml) of baking soda in 4 cups (1000 ml/1L) of water. Store this mouth rinse in a covered container. Discard and make new mouth rinse after 24 hours. Brush your teeth and tongue often using a soft toothbrush.

### **How to manage food that tastes too sweet:**

- Add a pinch of salt to food or drinks.
- Add something sour such as citrus fruits or vinegar to foods (example: sprinkle lemon juice on foods that taste too sweet).
- Add nutmeg, cinnamon, or cocoa powder to foods like ice cream or canned fruit.
- Try drinks that do not taste sweet (examples: homemade iced tea or vegetable juice).
- Dilute sweet drinks with water, milk, club soda, tonic water, or ice.

### **How to manage food that tastes too salty:**

- Make your own meals if possible. Processed or pre-made foods are high in salt (sodium).
- Choose foods that are lower in salt. Look for foods labelled 'low in sodium' or 'sodium reduced'.
- Rinse canned foods.
- Sprinkle foods with sugar or add honey to reduce the salty flavour.

### **How to manage food that tastes bitter:**

- Cooking your food may make it taste less bitter.
- Add:
  - Salt to broccoli, Brussels sprouts, or cauliflower.
  - Sugar to coffee or tea.
  - Citrus fruit or vinegar to pasta, rice, or cooked vegetables.
  - Cream, cream cheese, or creamy sauces to vegetables, potatoes, or hot cereal.
- Marinate meat in citrus juice (examples: orange, lemon, or lime), barbecue sauce, vinegar, cranberry sauce, or sweet chutneys.
- Add spices and herbs to reduce the bitter taste.
- Eat food that is cold or at room temperature.
- Add sugar, honey, or maple syrup to reduce the bitter taste.

### **How to manage food that tastes bland (not much taste):**

- Eat a different food with each bite.
- Eat different textures at the same meal (example: eat a soft casserole, crunchy salad, and a smooth pudding).
- Smell your food before taking a bite.
- Marinate your food before cooking.
- Add these to foods for more flavour:
  - Broth or stock
  - Citrus fruit juice

- Condiments like ketchup or mayonnaise
- Garlic or onion
- Gravy or sauce
- Herbs and spices
- Jam or jelly
- Maple syrup or honey
- Salad dressing
- Vinegar
- Hot sauce (if tolerated)
- Eat foods that have stronger flavours (examples: pickles, salsa, cured meats, sharp cheeses, and fermented condiments such as kimchi and sauerkraut).
- Add a pinch of sugar to salty foods or fluids (examples: soup, gravy, or tomato sauce).
- Eat salty foods at the same time as sweet foods (example: cottage cheese with fruit).
- Cook with salt or salt-based seasonings. Use herbs and spices such as basil or pepper.

#### **How to manage foods that taste metallic:**

- Use plastic or wooden cutlery or chopsticks instead of metal utensils.
- Use glass or ceramic cookware and bakeware instead of metal pots and pans.
- Choose fresh, frozen, or homemade foods instead of canned foods.
- Use mints, sugar free candies or chewing gum, or a mouth rinse before eating.
- Limit bitter or metallic tasting food such as red meat, coffee, or chocolate.
- Choose other sources of protein with mild flavours such as milk, cheese, yogurt, custards, puddings, eggs, poultry, fish, seafood, legumes (beans and lentils), and tofu.
- If meat tastes metallic:
  - Add sauces like mint jelly or chutney
  - Add marinades like citrus juice or teriyaki sauce

#### **How to manage smell changes:**

- Eat foods that are cold or at room temperature.
- Choose foods that do not have to be cooked (examples: sandwiches or crackers with cheese or peanut butter).
- Cook with a range hood or fan on, or open windows to circulate the air.
- Use a barbeque or microwave.
- Consider using a slow cooker or pressure cooker in another room if possible.
- Eat take out, frozen dinners, or order from a meal delivery service.
- Ask family and friends to help with cooking.

Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you:

- Are losing weight without trying.
- Are not eating well.
- Do not feel like eating.
- Have sores in your mouth.
- Have started new medications that may be causing changes in your taste.

Tell your family member/care partner what foods you enjoy. This will help them understand your likes and dislikes.

Talk to a member of your healthcare team if you have questions or concerns about any information in this handout.

*This handout was adapted by the Patient Education Program at the Durham Regional Cancer Centre from an Alberta Health Services handout titled: Eating with Taste and Smell Changes under a Creative Commons license. It was last reviewed in February 2026.*