

# AgePage

## Smell and Taste: Spice of Life

*Sally looked forward to Thanksgiving dinner at her daughter's house. But, when she ate the holiday food, she felt let down. It wasn't as tasty as she remembered. Sally knew her daughter was a good cook. What was wrong? Maybe Sally's sense of smell was the real problem.*

### Your Sense Of Smell

Smell is an important sense. Certain smells can help you recall your dad's cologne or alert you to danger, like smoke from a fire. When you can't smell things you enjoy like morning coffee or flowers, part of life may seem very dull.

As you get older, your sense of smell may fade. Your sense of smell is closely related to your sense of taste. So, when you can't smell, food may taste bland, and you may lose interest in eating.

### *What Causes Loss Of Smell?*

Some things can cause a long lasting loss of smell. A head injury, for example, can damage the nerves related to smell. Protect yourself by wearing a seat belt in the car and a helmet when biking.

Some problems with smell only last for a short time and may be due to:

- ◆ A cold or flu that causes a stuffy nose that blocks your sense of smell. The ability to smell will come back when you're better.
- ◆ Allergies that block your sense of smell. Try to avoid things you're allergic to, like pollen and pets. Talk to your doctor about how to manage your allergies.
- ◆ A harmless growth (called a polyp) in the nose or sinuses that gives you a runny nose. Having the growth removed may help.
- ◆ Some medications like antibiotics or blood pressure medicine may affect your sense of smell. Ask your doctor if there is another medicine you can take.
- ◆ Radiation and chemotherapy treatments. Your sense of smell may return when treatment stops.

Sometimes, loss of the sense of smell may be a sign of a more serious

disorder, such as Parkinson’s disease or Alzheimer’s disease. Be sure to tell your doctor about any change in your sense of smell.

### *Smells Can Keep You Safe*

It’s important to be aware of odors around you. You need to be able to smell:

- ◆ Smoke—check your smoke detectors once a year to make sure they work.
- ◆ Gas leaks—make sure you have a gas detector in your home.
- ◆ Spoiled food—throw out food that’s been in the refrigerator too long.
- ◆ Household chemicals—make sure there is fresh air where you’re working.

## Your Sense Of Taste

There are tiny taste buds all over your mouth—on your tongue, in your throat, even on the roof of your mouth. What we call “flavor” is based on five basic tastes—sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and tangy. How food smells also makes up its flavor.

When food tastes bland, many older people try to improve the flavor by adding more salt or sugar. This may not be healthy, especially if you have medical problems like high blood pressure or diabetes (high blood sugar).

When food doesn’t taste right, you may not eat the foods you need to keep you healthy. This can cause health problems such as:

- ◆ Weight loss
- ◆ Social isolation
- ◆ Depression

Eating food that is good for you is important to your health. If you have a problem with how food tastes, be sure to discuss it with your doctor.

### *What Causes Your Sense Of Taste To Change?*

There are many things that can cause you to lose your sense of taste. Most of the time, you can do something to regain taste.

Some medications can change the way food tastes. These include some antibiotics and medicines to lower cholesterol and blood pressure. Other medications can make your mouth dry. Having a dry mouth can cause food to taste funny and make it hard to swallow. If you think a medicine is changing how your food tastes, talk to your doctor before you stop taking your medicine.

Gum disease, dentures, and some infections can leave a bad taste in your mouth that changes the way food tastes.

You may prevent this problem by brushing your teeth, flossing, and using mouthwash. If you have a bad taste in your mouth that won't go away, talk to your dentist.

Alcohol can alter the way food tastes. Cutting back or stopping drinking may help. Also, smoking can reduce your sense of taste. Quitting may help.

## Cancer Treatments And Taste

People who are having cancer treatments might have a problem with taste. These treatments can make food taste bad or "off." Some say that food tastes metallic. This funny taste may keep some people from eating healthy food. If this happens to you, try:

- ◆ Eating four or five small meals during the day instead of three large meals
- ◆ Eating cold food, including yogurt, pudding, and jello. They may taste better than hot food.
- ◆ Eating fresh, uncooked vegetables. Cooked vegetables often have strong odors that are not appealing.
- ◆ Drinking lots of fluids including water, weak tea, juice, and ginger ale
- ◆ Tasting new foods to find ones that you like

Your sense of taste will usually return once your treatments stop.

## Colors And Spices Can Help

If you're having trouble smelling and tasting your food, try adding color and texture to make your food more interesting. For example, try eating brightly colored vegetables like carrots, spinach, sweet potatoes, broccoli, yellow squash, tomatoes, and red and green peppers. Also, if your diet allows, flavor your food with a little butter, olive oil, cheese, nuts, or some fresh herbs like parsley, rosemary, or sage. To put a zing in your food, add mustard, hot pepper, spices, or lemon or lime juice. Choose foods that look, smell, and taste good to you.

## A Special Doctor for Smell and Taste

There are doctors that help treat problems with smell and taste. They are called otolaryngologists (oto-lar-yn-gol-o-gists). These doctors can help you cope with the loss of smell and taste.

The doctor may ask:

- ◆ Can you smell anything at all?
- ◆ Can you taste any food?

- ◆ When did you first notice the problem?
- ◆ Is the problem getting worse?
- ◆ Have you been told that you have allergies or chronic sinus problems?
- ◆ What medicines do you take?

## Getting Help

We all have foods we like. If the foods you enjoy don't smell or taste the way you think they should, talk to your family doctor. There may be several things you can do.

## For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

### **Food and Drug Administration**

10903 New Hampshire Avenue  
Silver Spring, MD 20993  
1-888-463-6332  
[www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)

### **National Institute of Deafness and Other Communication Disorders Information Clearinghouse**

1 Communication Avenue  
Bethesda, MD 20892-3456  
1-800-241-1044 (toll-free)  
1-800-241-1055 (TTY/toll-free)  
[www.nidcd.nih.gov](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov)

For more information on health and aging, contact:

### **National Institute on Aging Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057  
Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057  
1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)  
1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)  
[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)  
[www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol](http://www.nia.nih.gov/Espanol)

To sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from NIA, go to [www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation](http://www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation).

### Visit NIHSeniorHealth

([www.nihseniorhealth.gov](http://www.nihseniorhealth.gov)), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



National Institute on Aging

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