

# Eating Well When You Have Taste and Smell Changes

You may find that illness, treatment, or your stage of life changes the way foods taste and smell. These changes can be different for every person.

There are many reasons your sense of taste or smell may change:

- aging
- certain medications
- illness like cancer and kidney disease
- dental problems
- some medical treatments like cancer treatments and surgeries
- pregnancy

Most people find that changes in taste and smell lessen over time. Try the ideas in this handout to help you enjoy your food.

## Tips

- **Try** new foods and beverages to find flavours that taste good to you.
- **Make a list** of foods that taste good. Eat them often even if you eat the same foods over and over for a while.
- **Choose** soft foods that need less chewing.
- **Don't eat** foods that taste bad. Find other foods that will give you the nutrients you need.
- **Don't** smoke cigarettes.
- **Eat** in a pleasant setting, where you can relax and feel comfortable.

## Mouth care

Good mouth care can make taste changes easier to deal with.

- Brush your teeth and your tongue with a soft toothbrush before and after each meal. Wait 10–15 minutes after you brush your teeth before you eat.
- Floss each day.

- Rinse your mouth before and after meals. You may want to rinse more often if your mouth tastes bad even after brushing.

Try these mouth rinses:

- club soda or sparkling mineral water
- ginger ale
- $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp (1 mL) baking soda or salt in 1 cup (250 mL) water
- water flavoured with cucumber, lemon, lime, or orange slices

## If your mouth is dry

A decrease in saliva can decrease the flavour of food.

- Keep your mouth moist by drinking 8 cups (2 litres) of fluid each day, spread out over the day. Talk to your doctor or dietitian if you have been told to limit your fluids.
- Stay away from alcohol, tobacco, and drinks that have caffeine in them (coffee, tea, colas).
- Don't use mouthwashes made with alcohol.
- Use a humidifier at night to help keep your mouth and throat moist.
- Talk to your pharmacist about using gels, sprays, or artificial saliva for dry mouth.
- Choose soft, moist foods like:
  - pudding, yogurt, cottage cheese, ice cream
  - soft or canned fruit
  - hot cereal, or cold cereal softened in milk
  - casseroles, soft cooked eggs
- Add sauces, gravies, salad dressings, oil, margarine, or butter to foods.
- You may be able to make more saliva by sucking on sour candies, ice chips, citrus fruit, or by chewing sugar-free gum.
- Try snacking on frozen fruit (berries, grapes, peaches) or popsicles.

Below are some common taste changes, and some tips to deal with them.

## If food tastes too sweet

- Add a pinch of salt to foods or fluids. Talk to your doctor or dietitian if you have been told to limit salt.
- Add something sour, like citrus fruits or vinegar, to sweet foods. For example, stir a bit of lemon juice into applesauce.
- Add instant coffee, nutmeg, cinnamon or cocoa powder to sweet foods such as pudding, nutrition supplement drinks, ice cream, milk shakes, or canned fruit.
- Try drinks that do not taste sweet, such as lemonade, homemade iced tea, vegetable juice, or sports drinks.
- Dilute drinks that are too sweet with water, milk, soda water, tonic water, or ice. For example, mix fruit juice with ice.
- Try eating foods cold or at room temperature.

## If food tastes too salty

- Cook without added salt or salt-based seasonings. Try herbs and spices, such as basil, rosemary, thyme, mint, dill, lemon, and fresh ground black pepper.
- Processed, pre-packaged, and pre-made foods are high in salt (sodium). Choose foods that are lower in salt such as:
  - fresh and homemade foods: hot cereal (not instant), plain rice, potatoes, or pasta, or fresh cooked meat/fish/poultry seasoned with herbs and spices
  - products that are labelled as low in sodium or sodium-reduced (for example, low sodium vegetable juice instead of regular vegetable juice)
- Rinse canned food in water to lower the salt content.
- Try adding a pinch of sugar or sweetener to foods or fluids that taste too salty, such as soup, gravy, cottage cheese, tomato sauce, or casseroles.

- Try sweet foods such as fresh fruit, dried fruit, canned fruit, warm milk with honey, or yogurt with fruit.

## If food tastes bitter

- Cooking your food may make it taste less bitter.
- Try adding:
  - salt to broccoli, Brussels sprouts, or cauliflower
  - sugar or sweetener to citrus fruit, coffee, or tea
  - citrus fruit or vinegar to pasta, rice, or cooked vegetables
  - oil, margarine, or butter
  - cream, cream cheese, or creamy sauces to canned fruit, vegetables, potatoes, hot cereal, or crackers
- Marinate meat in citrus juices, sweet and sour sauce, barbeque sauce, wine, or vinegar.
- Try vanilla pudding, custard, or milk.
- Eat food that is cold or at room temperature.

## If food tastes bland

- Try a different food with every bite, rather than eating all one food and then moving to another food.
- Try to have a mix of textures at each meal. For example, eat a soft casserole, a crunchy salad, and a smooth pudding at the same meal.
- Take a moment to smell food it before taking a bite.
- Increase the flavour by adding these to foods:
  - citrus fruits
  - fresh garlic
  - herbs and spices
  - honey
  - jam
  - ketchup
  - mayonnaise
  - mustard
  - raw onion
  - sandwich spreads
- You can also try adding flavoured liquids:
  - broth or stock
  - gravies
  - marinades
  - vinegar
  - salad dressing
  - sauces: soy, barbeque
  - maple syrup

- Try more foods that have stronger flavours, such as pickles, salsa, cured meats, dark chocolate, nuts, sharp cheeses, or dried fruit.

## If you have a metallic taste in your mouth

- Use plastic cutlery or chopsticks instead of metal utensils.
- Use glass cookware and bakeware.
- Choose fresh, frozen, or homemade foods instead of canned foods.
- Try sugar-free candies, mints, chewing gum, or the mouth rinses listed on page 1. Use the rinses before eating.
- If meat tastes metallic, try:
  - mixing meat into casseroles and stews to lessen their taste
  - eating leftover meats cold
  - peanut butter, nuts, cheese, cooked beans, or eggs
  - adding sauces such as applesauce, cranberry sauce, or mint jelly
  - marinades such as citrus juice, Italian dressing, vinegar, sweet and sour sauce, barbeque sauce, teriyaki sauce, or wine

## If smells bother you

- Eat foods that are cold or at room temperature.
- Choose foods that do not have to be cooked, such as:
  - sandwiches
  - cold cereal
  - milk, milkshakes, or smoothies
  - crackers with cheese
  - vegetables and fruit with dip or yogurt
- Cook with a fan or by an open window.
- Use the barbeque or microwave.
- Use covered pots and pans.
- Cook less at home. Get take-out, ready-to-eat, frozen dinners, or use a meal delivery service such as Meals on Wheels.

- Ask family and friends to help with cooking.
- Use a straw or a cup with a lid for drinks that have a strong smell.
- Eat away from the area where the food was prepared.

## Talk to your healthcare provider

- Talk to your doctor or dentist if you have problems with your teeth or sores in your mouth.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist to see if any of your medications might be causing your change in taste. There might be other medications you can take.
- If you are still not eating well after trying these suggestions, or if you are losing weight without trying, talk to your doctor or dietitian.

## Talk to your family or caregiver

Talk to your family or caregiver about the kinds of food that will work best for you now. This may help them understand your likes and dislikes.