

Changes in Taste and Smell

Cancer and its treatment can cause changes in your senses of taste and smell. You might notice an increased sensitivity to sour or bitter tastes or experience a metallic taste; conversely, food might taste bland or like cardboard. These taste changes might be temporary or permanent and, either way, can affect your appetite.

Your senses of taste and smell can change from day to day. Try experimenting with new foods or cuisines, marinades, spices, and ways of preparing what you eat. Finding foods that taste appealing may be a process of trial and error. Some people who experience taste changes avoid their favorite foods to prevent the possibility of developing a distaste for them in the future. Also, keeping your mouth clean by rinsing and brushing can help foods taste better.

Balancing Flavors

Balancing flavors using simple, healthy ingredients will make your foods taste their best. The four best components for balancing flavors are fats, acids, salts, and sweeteners.



Fats: Fats coat the tongue and allow flavors to spread around the tongue and mouth. Fats also add heft to a dish and give you a satisfied feeling.

What works well: Cold-pressed extra-virgin olive oil has a nice, clean taste. Naturally occurring, unhydrogenated vegetable oils such as canola, safflower, sunflower, or other olive oils will also work.



Acids: Acids – especially citric acid – counterbalance the sweet flavor in a dish.

What works well: Fresh lemon or lime juice is remarkably good with other fruits, fish, and raw or cooked vegetables. Many types of vinegar – balsamic, brown rice, or red wine – also work well.



Salts: Salt “unlocks” the flavor of every food it comes in contact with.

What works well: Sea salt has more flavor than regular table salt, but table salt can be used as well.



Sweeteners: Adding a sweet ingredient can cut an acidic, salty, or bitter taste in a dish.

What works well: Grade-B organic maple syrup has a more complex and satisfying flavor than refined sugar, and you need much less of it. Honey, brown rice syrup, and agave nectar will also work in a pinch.

Managing taste changes

Here are some things you can do to manage changes in taste – no matter what the taste is:

- Avoid cigarette smoking, and eliminate bad odors.
- Eat in pleasant surroundings.
- Increase your fluid intake.
- Practice good oral care. Rinse with a mixture of 1 quart water, $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp. salt, and 1 tsp. baking soda.

Bitter or metallic taste

- Add a few drops of a healthy fat, such as olive oil, and a little bit of sea salt. Sea salt doesn't have the bitter taste that regular iodized salt has.
- Use sugar-free lemon drops, gum, or mints.
- Flavor foods with spices and seasonings, such as onion, garlic, chili powder, basil, oregano, rosemary, tarragon, barbecue sauce, mustard, ketchup, or mint.
- Use plastic utensils instead of stainless-steel flatware.
- Try fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables instead of canned.
- Take sips of flavored water between bites of food to cleanse your palate.

Bland or cardboard taste

- Add a few drops of an acid flavor such as lemon, lime, or vinegar. The acid flavor will enhance the other flavors in the dish, making them easier to taste.

Salty, bitter, or sour taste

- Add sweeteners, syrup, or a little bit of sugar. A little sweetness increases pleasant tastes.

Meats taste strange

- Marinade and cook meats in sweet juices, fruits, or acidic dressings with lemon or vinegar. For example, try sweet-and-sour pork with pineapple or chicken with a honey glaze.

How to manage food odors:

- Use a cup with a lid and straw for soups, beverages, or liquid nutrition supplements that have a strong odor.
- Choose foods that do not need to be cooked, such as cold sandwiches, crackers and cheese, yogurt and fruit, or cold cereal and milk.
- Serve foods cold or at cooler temperatures. Foods served hot often have strong smells and flavors.
- Avoid eating in rooms that are stuffy or too warm.
- Avoid eating in places that have strong food or cooking odors. Turn stove vents on to get rid of cooking odors.

Sources: Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics; Caring 4 Cancer

