

Handling Unpleasant Food and Drink Tastes During Cancer Treatment

Miranda Moss is a restaurant owner who regards eating as one of life's great pleasures. But after starting chemotherapy for breast cancer, she noticed that foods didn't taste the same.

"I often plan my day around what delicious foods I know that I'm going to eat that day. So, it was really, really challenging for me when I started to lose my taste buds. It was actually, I would say more than challenging, it was actually depressing. I felt like a deep sadness about that shift."-Miranda, Patient

Cancer and its treatments can change the way foods taste by, among other things, leaving a bitter or metallic taste in your mouth, making certain flavors unappealing or bland or reducing your ability to distinguish among flavors. Some cancer treatments can also damage cells in your nose that detect smells.

"Your sense of taste and smell are linked. So, you identify flavors of food by their smell. If the cells in your nose are damaged, it you may not be able to tell the difference between food flavors. So, for example, if you're eating a grapefruit and a lemon and you can't tell the difference."-Kari Ikemoto, Registered Dietitian

In addition, cancer treatments may interfere with the production of saliva. Dry mouth, known as xerostomia can make foods feel like cardboard or sand in your mouth. When food tastes unpleasant, it can be hard to eat without getting sick to your stomach.

"So, as a result, you may limit foods or avoid them altogether. This may lead to nutritional deficiencies and weight loss."- Kari Ikemoto, Registered Dietitian

To make foods taste better, try mixing 1 teaspoon of salt with 1 teaspoon of baking soda in a quart of water.

"Rinse your mouth with this solution before each meal. After your meal either brush your teeth or rinse with the solution again."- Kari Ikemoto, Registered Dietitian

Other tips: Suck on sugar-free mints or fruit-flavored drops, or chew gum to stimulate saliva production. If you have dry mouth, sip small amounts of fluid as you eat. Eat soft foods like soup, pudding, or mashed potatoes. Or moisten your food with gravies or sauces to make it easier to chew and swallow. You can also ask your dietitian or health care provider about using a saliva substitute, which coats and moistens your mouth or throat to help you swallow.

You might find that you now like some foods you once disliked. Experiment with different types of foods and seasonings, until you find ones that taste good to you.

"Things like Rosemary, oregano, garlic, onion, ketchup, barbeque sauce, mint can all be flavor enhancers. Adding sweetness to bitter or acidic foods with fruit sauces or sweet-and-sour sauce. You can also add tart flavors like vinegar but be careful with acidic foods like tomato sauce or citrus If you have mouth sores, as these can cause irritation."- Kari Ikemoto, Registered Dietitian

If the metallic taste of silverware bothers you, use plastic knives, forks, and spoons. Using glass or ceramic

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cookware can also help. Meat may have a metallic or chemical flavor as well. If so, try switch to other protein sources like chicken, fish, beans or tofu. Sometimes just the smell of cooking food can turn your stomach.

"The solution is to serve foods cold or at room temperature. If you do cook food, be sure to use a well-ventilated area or an outdoor grill so the smells don't overwhelm you." - Kari Ikemoto, Registered Dietitian

Taking zinc sulfate supplements can help prevent taste changes but check with your healthcare provider or dietitian first.

"Are you experiencing any taste changes right now or how is it affecting your appetite?"

Sometimes taste changes can continue for months or years after treatment, or they may be permanent. Your health care team can help you adjust your diet to deal with any long-term changes. But usually, foods will start tasting more like they used to within 1 to 2 months after treatment—as they have for Miranda.

"I'm really grateful, because over time, as I've gotten better, my taste buds have also begun to shift to more to what they were like before, so that's really exciting for me, as it opens up a whole new world of foods that I was not able to enjoy a year ago, that I can enjoy again now." -Miranda, Patient