

Taste changes

Cancer and its treatments can change your senses of taste and smell. Taste changes are an alteration in how our taste buds perceive flavours – namely sweet, sour, bitter, salty and savoury. One may experience changes in any or all of these flavours – foods may taste bitter or not as sweet as they used to be, or they may have no taste at all. Many people become more sensitive to sour and bitter tastes, or have a “metallic” taste in the mouth, especially after eating meat.

How long these changes last is different for everyone and depends on your treatment. In general, treatment-related taste changes usually recover 2-3 months after treatment ends, but it may take up to a year before your sense of taste returns to normal again.



What you need to look out for

- Food tastes different as compared to before
- All foods taste the same
- All foods taste bland
- Strong dislike of certain foods
- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss

Causes of Taste changes

Taste changes may be caused by:

- **Chemotherapy causing damage to the cells in the mouth.** Certain chemotherapy drugs are more likely to cause taste changes (e.g. Cisplatin, Cyclophosphamide, Doxorubicin, Fluorouracil, Paclitaxel, Vincristine), but these changes usually stop about 3-4 weeks after treatment ends.
- **Radiation therapy to the head and neck.** Taste buds and salivary glands can be damaged by radiation, resulting in dry mouth and taste changes. The sense of taste may start to improve about 3 weeks to 2 months after treatment ends. In some cases, it may not fully return to how it was before treatment.
- **Other treatments for cancer.** Examples: Surgery to the nose or mouth, biological therapies

- **Medications.** Examples: Antibiotics, certain anti-hypertensive medications, opioids
- **Mouth problems.** Examples: Dry mouth, Mouth infections

How it can be treated

Some causes of taste changes can be treated to improve the sense of taste. For instance, taking anti-fungal medications to clear up thrush in the mouth can allow some patients to taste better. Your doctor or nurse will ask you questions and examine you to ascertain the cause of your taste change, before deciding on the appropriate treatment for you.

Although there are no specific treatments for some of the other causes, you can take steps to reduce the impact of taste changes on your appetite and weight (see the section on “***What you can do***” below). Your doctor or nurse may also recommend you to see a dietician, to improve your diet or suggest ways to improve the taste of your food.

What you can do

Here are some tips to help you cope better with taste changes:

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<p>General advice</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use non-metallic utensils and cookware to lessen the metallic taste • Eat sugarless mints and lemon drop sweets to mask the metallic taste 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To ensure your comfort, avoid eating in rooms that are too warm or stuffy • Avoid eating 1-2 hours before chemotherapy and up to 3 hours after treatment, to prevent food aversion (dislike) caused by nausea and vomiting • Avoid taking any dietary supplements without consulting your doctor, especially during cancer treatment

Oral hygiene

- Rinse your mouth before meals to remove any bad taste in the mouth. You may use ½ teaspoon salt + ½ teaspoon baking soda + 1 cup warm water to make up the mouth rinse.
- Practise good oral hygiene by brushing your teeth at least twice a day

Choice of food

- Try a range of foods (even those that you will not normally eat) to find out which ones taste acceptable to you
- Some people find cold or room temperature food easier to eat than hot food. You can try freezing fruits like rock melon, grapes, oranges and watermelon and eat them as frozen treats.
- Try other protein sources (e.g. fish, dairy products and eggs) if red meats do not taste good

- Avoid coffee, chocolate or any other foods if they taste bitter
- If you are on a chemotherapy drug called Oxaliplatin, refrain from taking cold foods as Oxaliplatin causes you to have increased sensitivity to low temperatures

Food preparations

- Have good ventilation in your kitchen to keep the cooking smell away
- Counter salty and bitter tastes with added sweeteners. Counter excessive sweet taste with added lemon juice and salt
- Marinate meats using sauces, fruit juices or wine, if meat tastes bitter to you
- Try adding new flavourings or spices such as onion, garlic, chilli powder, basil, oregano, rosemary, barbeque sauce, mustard, ketchup and mint to enhance taste and smell

When to call your cancer care team

Please inform your doctor or nurse if taste changes have caused you to be unable to eat anything, or if you have lost more than 2kg of your body weight due to loss of appetite from taste changes.

If you have any questions regarding the above information, please call Cancer Helpline at **+65 6225 5655** or approach your doctor or nurse for further details.

The above contents are made available as part of TEMASEK FOUNDATION-ACCESS (Accessible Cancer Care to Enable Support for Survivors) PROGRAMME, a holistic care programme to support cancer patients during their care and recovery journey.

The contents have been approved by the Cancer Education Information Service, National Cancer Centre Singapore (NCCS), for people with cancer and their families and caregivers. However, this information serves only as a guide and should not be used as a substitute for medical diagnosis, treatment or advice. For specific medical conditions, please seek expert medical advice from your healthcare team.

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