Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Managing Taste Changes During Chemotherapy

This information will teach you how you can manage taste changes during chemotherapy.

Nutrition is important before, during, and after your cancer treatment. Getting enough nutrition can help you:

- Maintain your strength.
- Keep your weight stable.
- Fight infection.
- Have fewer side effects during and after your treatment.

Read this resource at least once before your treatment. You may also use it as a guide during and after your treatment.

Clinical dietitian nutritionists can also help you plan your diet during and after treatment. They can help make sure you get enough nutrition. To make an appointment with them, call 212-639-7312. You can also ask a member of your care team to help you.

Side effects during treatment

Chemotherapy treatments can cause taste changes that at times can make it hard to eat. Changes in your sense of taste or smell can affect your food choices, eating habits, and how you enjoy food.

You may need to change your diet because of taste changes. This can help you get enough nutrition and keep you at a healthy weight. It can also help with your

recovery. You may also have dry mouth from less saliva secretion (spit in your mouth). This can make it hard to swallow food. Using an alcohol-free mouthwash (such as Biotene®) or gargling with water can help you make more saliva. Sugar-free hard candies and chewing gum may also help.

Tips for managing taste changes

Your sense of taste is made up of 5 main tastes: salty, sweet, savory (spicy or salty without sweetness), bitter, and sour. The most common changes are feeling bitter and metallic (metal) tastes in your mouth. Sometimes, food does not have any taste. Changes are different for each person, and often stop after treatment ends.

You may notice your favorite foods taste different than usual or do not taste good. If this happens, avoid them for now. You can always try them again after your treatment ends.

It's important to keep good oral hygiene (take good care of your mouth) during treatment. Taking care of your mouth will help manage your taste changes. Brush your teeth and tongue if your doctor or dentist says it's OK. Brush at least 2 times a day with a soft bristle toothbrush that's gentle on your teeth and tongue.

Your care team may recommend using an alcohol-free mouthwash (such as Biotene®). You can also make your own mouthwash. Mix 1 teaspoon of baking soda and 1 teaspoon of salt in 1 quart (4 cups) of warm water. Use mouthwash often, such as before and after eating, and throughout the day.

Using dental floss can help with your taste changes. If you already floss, you can keep doing so. Floss gently to avoid causing any bleeding. If you do not floss, talk with your dentist about the best way to start.

Avoid:

- Using nicotine or any tobacco product. This includes vaping devices, such as vape pens or e-cigarettes.
- Drinking alcohol.

- Eating sharp or pointy foods (such as chips or hard bread sticks). This can harm your mouth.

If foods seem tasteless (does not taste like anything):

- Change the texture of your foods. For example, you may like mashed potatoes more than baked potatoes.
- Change the temperature of your foods. For example, some warm foods may taste better cold or at room temperature.
- Choose and make foods that look and smell good to you.
- Use more spices and flavorings. Do not add them if they cause discomfort or if you have mouth sores or pain when swallowing. To add spices and flavorings, you can:
  - Use herbs, such as basil, thyme, oregano, and mint.
  - Use spices, such as salt, onion powder, garlic powder, and ground pepper.
  - Use marinades, such as salad dressings, fruit juices, or other sauces.
  - Use sauces and condiments, such as soy sauce, mayonnaise, or ketchup.
- Blend fruit into your shakes or yogurt. You can also try mint- or coffee-flavored shakes.
- Pre-season or marinate your meats or meat substitutes (such as tofu or tempeh). This helps spread flavor evenly. If you can, buy pre-marinated meats or meat substitutes. This helps you save time and prepare your meal faster.
- Try sour and tart foods (such as citrus fruits or kimchi). These may help stimulate your taste. Do this only if your mouth isn't sore.
- Try different flavors of the same food, such as different flavors of ice cream.
- Try alternating bites of different-tasting foods within a meal. This means you take one bite of one food and then one bite of another food. Do this for the whole meal. For example, try:
  - Cottage cheese and pineapple.

- Plain yogurt and fresh fruit.
- Grilled cheese and tomato soup.

If there's a bitter or metallic taste in your mouth:

- Rinse your mouth with water before and after meals.
- If meats (such as red meats) taste bitter, marinate them in sauces or fruit juices or squeeze lemon juice on them. Do this only if your mouth isn't sore.
- Include meat substitutes for protein.
- Use plastic utensils instead of metal.
- Try sugar-free mints or gum.
- Avoid canned food items (such as sauces and soups). Choose items in a glass or plastic jar or a box instead.

If foods taste too sweet:

- Add some salt to the food.
- Dilute (mix) sweet drinks with water.
- If everything tastes sweet, try more acidic foods (such as foods with lemon). Do this only if your mouth isn't sore.

If foods taste or smell different than usual:

- Avoid foods with strong odors (smells). Beef and fish may have stronger odors, so try eating poultry (such as chicken and turkey), tofu, beans, eggs, and dairy products.
- When cooking, open lids of pots and pans away from you. The smell will move away from you, not towards you.
- Open windows while cooking if the smell bothers you.
- Choose foods that can be eaten cold or at room temperature. Let foods cool down before eating. Foods that are cold or at room temperature have less smell than warm foods.

- Drink small sips of liquid throughout your meals to rinse out the taste of the food

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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