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# Altered Taste and Smell

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Some cancer treatments can cause a change in taste and smell. You may notice that foods taste bitter or metallic, overly sweet, too salty, strong or bland. These changes may affect your appetite. Remember that good nutrition is an essential part of treatment. Below are some tips for managing taste changes during your treatment.

## Managing Food Odors

- Cover beverages and drink through a straw to reduce smells.
- Avoid using the microwave, as it will spread food odors.
- Serve cold plates or room temperature foods.
- Avoid slow cookers or instant pots.
- Avoid having fast food in the car.

## Managing Taste Changes

- Drink fluids with and in-between meals. Add a slice of lemon or a flavoring packet to water.
- Consume fruit or fruit juice with your meals to help refresh taste buds.
- Keep your mouth clean by brushing and flossing daily. Make sure to brush your teeth and tongue.
- Try rinsing with a baking soda and salt mouthwash before meals.
  - Recipe:  $\frac{3}{4}$  teaspoon salt, 1 teaspoon baking soda, 1 quart water
- Try fresh or frozen fruit smoothies with ice cream or yogurt.
- Avoid eating your favorite foods during treatment to prevent developing food aversions.
- Try sugar-free gum, hard candy, mints or lemon drops.
- Add seasonings, spices and herbs to enhance taste such as lemon, onion, garlic, mint, basil, dill, rosemary, chili powder, cinnamon, nutmeg, oregano, and sauces or condiments (such as BBQ sauce, ketchup, mustard, ranch, and vinegar).
- Avoid acidic foods if you have a sore mouth or throat.

## If Foods Taste Too Salty

- Choose no-salt added and reduced-sodium products.
- Add sweet or sour flavor to mask the salty flavor, such as pure maple syrup, sugar, sugar substitutes and/or lemon juice.

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## If Foods Taste Bitter or Metallic

- Avoid drinking and eating out of metal cans; use chopsticks, plastic utensils and glass cookware instead.
- Try adding fat such as olive oil, butter or nut butter. Add olive oil to pasta.
- Add a small amount (1/8-1/4 teaspoon) of sweetness to your food such as pure maple syrup, honey, agave, fruit, or caramelized onion. For example, try salmon with maple syrup glaze.
- Red meat can often taste metallic. Substitute other protein-rich foods such as chicken, fish, eggs, cheese, peanut butter, dried beans/legumes or Greek yogurt.
- Try cooking red meat in a sweet and sour sauce, citrus marinade or wine/vinegar.

## If Foods Taste Too Sweet

- For overly sweet dishes, try adding acid (lemon juice, for example) and salt.
- Place a couple drops of lemon juice on your tongue before eating.
- Try more acidic foods such as tomatoes, citrus fruits, apples, dried fruit, dairy, mushrooms, pasta, oats, rice, black beans, kidney beans, banana, grapes, vinegar, honey, chicken or eggs.

## If Foods Taste Too Strong

- Eat mild-tasting foods such as crackers, bread, cereal, mashed potatoes, milk, rice, cottage cheese, gelatin, plain noodles with butter, puddings, plain yogurt, peanut butter, eggs, beans, broth-based soup, custard, fruit/vegetable juice, cooked fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid fried foods, raw fruits and vegetables, seeds and nuts, strong cheeses (such as bleu cheese), spices, sauerkraut, pickles and sugary foods.

## If Foods Taste Bland

- A pinch of flavor can go a long way. Adjust flavor by adding lemon juice, sea salt and/or maple syrup.
- Move flavor to the front of your tongue.
- Add sauces, seasonings and herbs. For example, try balsamic glazed carrots.
- Try sour-tasting foods such as vinegar, yogurt, fermented vegetables, sourdough bread, lemons, grapefruit and tart cherries.
- Serve foods with stronger flavors such as chili, spaghetti and apple pie.
- Alternate bites of different-tasting foods during your meals such as cottage cheese with peaches/pears, grilled cheese and tomato soup, banana and nut butter.

Please contact your VA Registered Dietitian Nutritionist with any nutrition questions or for further assistance.