

Managing taste changes

Taste can change because of cancer or its treatment, and this can make eating less enjoyable. But keeping up with eating is still very important, even if food doesn't taste right or tastes bad. This guide will help you understand what's happening and give you tips to try to manage it. It uses a question-and-answer approach to help explain and support the management of taste changes.



Top Tips



Keep your mouth clean and fresh using soft toothbrushes.

Tongue scrapers can also help. Avoid mouthwashes with alcohol (see section 1)



Experiment with temperature of foods and drinks.

Foods can taste different when hot or cold (see section 2)



Keep your mouth moist using sips of water, xylitol sweets and dry mouth products (see section 3)



Add extra sauces and gravies to make meals more interesting (see section 3)



Try adding some fat to meals to help enhance flavour (see section 4)



Use different textures of food to add interest like crunchy, crispy and smooth (see section 5)



Smell lemon and clove essential oils for 15 seconds twice each day which can help taste (see section 6)



Taste changes can impact on appetite and nutrition which may lead to weight loss, fatigue and a reduced quality of life. Monitor your weight weekly if concerned and ensure you're eating a varied, balanced, diet (see section 6)



Use different flavours (see table inside booklet) for specific flavour issues (see section 8)

Taste can take time to improve. Keep experimenting and revisiting different flavours over time.

1 How to take care of your mouth



A healthy mouth is essential for good taste. Here's what to do:



Check

Check your mouth using a light or torch daily for redness, swelling, sores, ulcers, or a white coating (called oral thrush).



Brush

Brush your teeth, tongue, and gums gently twice a day with a soft or child's toothbrush or 360-degree mouth brush. You can also gently use a tongue scraper if you have a coated tongue or foul taste in your mouth.



Avoid

Avoid mouthwashes which contain alcohol - these can sting and make your mouth dry. Instead, make your own by dissolving one teaspoon of salt or baking soda with 570mls (1 pint) of cold or warm water. Gargle with this up to four times each day to remove bits of food.



Soreness

If your mouth is sore because of treatment, talk to your team or GP with any concerns. They can suggest gels, sprays, or pain relief.



Dentures

If you wear dentures, clean them after eating and soak them overnight.

2 Does food temperature matter?



Food and drink might taste better at different temperatures.



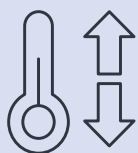
Experiment

Some people prefer foods at room temperature or cold. Others prefer hot meals. Experiment with different foods and different temperatures.



Chill

Cold foods may taste less sweet. You can chill fruits or freeze cubes of melon, mango, or grapes and serve with desserts. Try savoury meals like quiche and salads, potato salad and coleslaw chilled



Cooling/warming effects

Certain foods that cause a cooling or warming effect which may help with the taste experience:

Cooling foods

- **Add fresh mint to yogurt or dips. Keep fruits chilled.**
- **Cucumber and yoghurt for example in tzatziki**



Warming foods

Use ginger, mustard, or cinnamon in meals. For example:

- **Add mustard** to sandwiches or sauces
- **Try ginger jam** in porridge or fresh ginger in soups
- **Sprinkle cinnamon** on pudding or mix it into warm drinks



3 How do you keep your mouth moist?



Saliva (spit) helps you chew, swallow, and talk. It also helps keep your mouth and teeth healthy. Saliva mixes with food to dissolve tiny taste particles. This helps your taste buds recognise the flavour. It also keeps your mouth moist, so food isn't dry or hard to swallow.

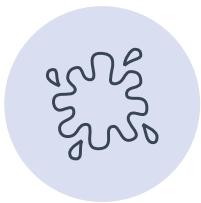
Sometimes cancer treatment or medicine can reduce saliva and make it thick and sticky. This can make your mouth feel uncomfortable. Here are some tips to help:

What to try when your mouth feels dry:



Soft foods

Choose soft, saucy meals like casseroles, macaroni cheese, noodles with sauce, or fish pie.



Gravies and sauces

Add gravies or sauces (like sweet and sour, tomato, or cheese sauce) to make food less dry.



If food feels dry

If foods taste or feels like cardboard or wallpaper paste, try cutting, blending, or mashing them with sauces or gravy to make them easier to eat.



Stimulation

Gently massaging just in front of your ears, under your jaw and under your chin where your salivary glands are positioned can also help.

How to keep hydrated

Keeping well hydrated is very important and can help with managing taste changes.



How much do I need?

Try to have at least six to eight glasses (1.5-2 litres each day) of fluid. Keep an eye on the colour of your urine (wee) which should be clear and pale.

Flavourings

Sometimes the taste of water is unpleasant.

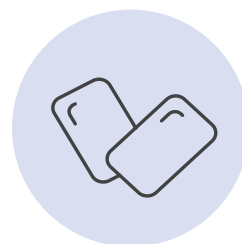
Try flavoured water, adding sugar-free squash or cordial, a slice of lemon, lime, cucumber or some fresh mint. Try herbal, iced or fruit teas, smoothies or milkshakes.



Carbonated drinks like sparkling water, ginger ale, tonic or soda water can be helpful if your mouth is not sore.



Bovril®, Oxo®, Marmite®, or miso which are more savoury if tea and coffee are unpleasant.



Chewing sugar free gum or sucking sweets containing xylitol can help to stimulate the production of saliva. Avoid sucking sugar containing sweets or mints as they can damage teeth.

4 Are there foods that will enhance the flavour ?



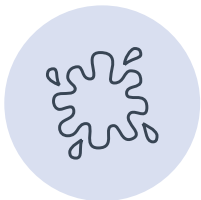
Adding fats to meals can make food taste better because it helps carry flavour.

You could try:



Sauces

Cheese sauces, mayonnaise, or tartar sauce can make meals tastier.



Salad dressings

Try salad dressings with oil and sharp fruits like raspberry.



Butters/pesto

Use flavoured butters or pesto (like red, green, olive or mint pesto).



Coconut milk

Adding coconut milk to curries or soups.

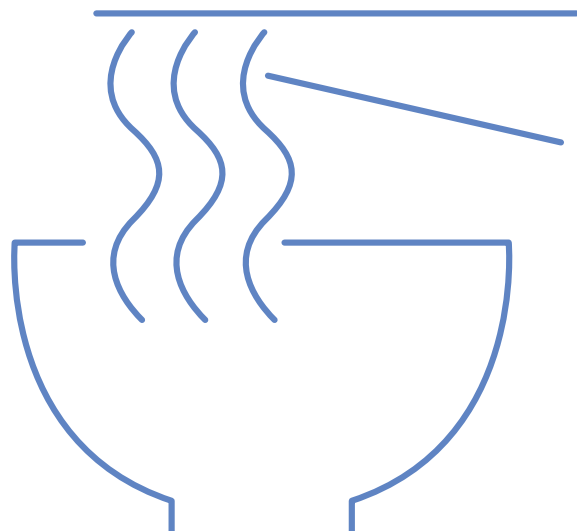
If your mouth is dry, it can be hard to melt the fat found in some cold foods making it feel coated and claggy. **Drinking something warm during your meal may help.**

5 How does texture affect taste?



Texture (how food feels in your mouth) can make eating more palatable and flavourful. Here are some ideas:

- ✓ **Using foods which naturally have more fluid in them** such as fruit, salad and vegetables can help to add texture but also provide a pop of fluid which can help to add interest such as cool grapes, fresh pineapple or tomatoes with cubes of cheese, fresh melon with ham or tinned fruit and custard /rice pudding.
- ✓ **If you get on with more textured foods** try crispy onions, dukkha (a crunchy mixture of dried chickpeas, seeds and spices), sprinkle on salads, dips or use as a coating on fish or chicken dishes.
- ✓ **Bread, potatoes and pastry may be difficult.** Try having with extra butter or spread, warm pastry or bread with a nourishing soup. Some people find toast easier to manage than bread. Experiment with toasting to see what is best for you.
- ✓ **Using the same ingredient two ways** can add texture:
 - ✓ Raw cauliflower sprinkled over creamy cauliflower soup.
 - ✓ Crispy fried noodles on soft noodle ramen.
 - ✓ Fried courgette rounds on creamy courgette pasta or gratin



6 Why is nutrition important?



When your taste changes, eating can feel harder or less enjoyable. It might even make you feel nervous about eating around other people. This can leave you feeling tired and cause weight or muscle loss. Try include a variety of foods from all food groups for energy and building yourself up, however sometimes certain foods, like red meat, can taste bad (foul, bitter or metallic), there are other protein options you can try, such as:

- ✓ Cheese and other dairy products
- ✓ Eggs
- ✓ Fish
- ✓ Beans, lentils and chickpeas
- ✓ Nuts, seeds or nut butters
- ✓ Tofu, tempeh, soya or Quorn™ (plant-based proteins)

Eating enough to stay healthy is important, so ask your healthcare team if you need more advice.

7 Does your sense of smell affect taste?

Taste and smell work together to create flavour. You may experience changes to your sense of smell. It can make food harder to taste or even make some smells feel too strong or unpleasant.

Here are some tips:

- ✓ Eat in places with fresh air. Open windows or use fans if needed.
- ✓ Try cold meals or ready-made foods that don't involve cooking smells.
- ✓ Use lids on pots to keep strong smells from spreading.

8 Hints to manage specific food changes

Sometimes food might taste overly sweet, extra salty, or just not like what you're used to. Experiment with different flavours and textures to find what works best for you. Some useful strategies to try if you experience the following:

If foods tastes too bland

- ✓ Use fresh and/or dried herbs, spices, soy sauce, ginger, Worcester sauce, miso, curry powder
- ✓ Umami paste
- ✓ Salt and pepper
- ✓ Add lemon/lime juice to food/water (if your mouth is not sore)
- ✓ Try adding pickled foods like gherkins, capers, beetroot, mixed pickled vegetable
- ✓ Use sugar, honey, maple syrup
- ✓ Add sauces and dressings like balsamic and other vinegars / soy / teriyaki / chilli jam/ Worcester sauces / marinades / mustard
- ✓ Try adding anchovies or smoked fish to dishes
- ✓ Cold/warm foods may add an enjoyable element to the meal
- ✓ Warm foods instead of hot may allow taste buds to detect flavours better

If foods tastes too bitter

- ✓ If red meat is more metallic/bitter/chemical tasting try other protein sources e.g. fish, chicken, eggs, beans, milk and dairy or alternative equivalents
- ✓ Try hot chocolate or malted drinks, vanilla chai tea, herbal, fruit or mint teas if tea and coffee tastes bitter
- ✓ Offset bitter taste with cinnamon or vanilla bean paste
- ✓ Try fruit smoothies. Having small sips of flavoured drinks may help, including ginger flavoured drinks.
- ✓ Soak meats in a fruity marinade or tamarind paste
- ✓ Add sweet chilli dipping sauce or mint/ apple/ cranberry/mango chutney horseradish/ Worcester /hoisin dipping sauce
- ✓ Nibble on moist fruit, suck on sweets or chew sugar-free gum between meals/snacks to offset any bad taste

If foods tastes too sweet

- ✓ Add herbs, spices, salt and pepper
- ✓ Avoid dried fruit, jams honey and sweeteners
- ✓ Use nut butters/tahini
- ✓ Focus on more savoury dishes, soups and snacks
- ✓ Salted pretzels, salted nuts
- ✓ Savoury popcorn
- ✓ Peanut butter and apple
- ✓ Add lemon or lime juice to food and water if mouth is not sore
- ✓ Add sauces and dressings like balsamic vinegar, soy / teriyaki / chilli / Worcester sauces
- ✓ Try plain breakfast cereals with less added sugar. Porridge can also be a good option to try

If foods tastes too salty

- ✓ Avoid adding salt to cooking, choose low salt condiments
- ✓ Add small amounts of honey, sugar or maple syrup
- ✓ Try lower salt cheeses such as mozzarella, cream, ricotta cheese, cottage cheese or quark
- ✓ Try roast meat, egg mayonnaise, prawn cocktail in sandwiches instead of cured, salty meats like ham or salami

NOTE: These strategies can be temporary and it's important to monitor if your taste is improving as time goes by and re-introduce by 'trial and error' those flavours you may have been avoiding for a short period of time

9 What can I do if I can't taste something in particular?

You may not be able to taste one or more of sweet, sour, salty, bitter or umami (savoury). This can be difficult as foods may not taste as you remember them to or other flavours may seem too strong. Some people feel that meals lack “balance” in flavour. If you feel you are missing one of these, try including very strong versions as you may pick up more flavour, particularly over time if you persevere. You could try the following:

If you can't taste **sweet**

- ✓ Mangoes, bananas, grapes
- ✓ Sweet potatoes, sweetcorn
- ✓ Honey, maple syrup, jam, mango chutney, golden syrup

If you can't taste **sour**

- ✓ Lemon, lime, grapefruit, orange
- ✓ Vinegar, pickles, sauerkraut, kimchi
- ✓ Yogurt, kefir, sour cream
- ✓ Tamarind, rhubarb, cranberries, red currants

If you can't taste **salty**

- ✓ Salt (different types such as sea salt, rock salt, pink Himalayan salt, black salt, seaweed salt, chilli salt, lemon salt, garlic salt all have different flavours)
- ✓ Anchovies, olives
- ✓ Cheese (feta, Parmesan, strong cheddar)
- ✓ Pretzels, crisps, salted nuts

If you can't taste **bitter**

- ✓ Dark chocolate, coffee, black tea
- ✓ Kale, radicchio, endive
- ✓ Grapefruit, cranberries, lime pickle, okra
- ✓ Brussels sprouts
- ✓ Tonic water

If you can't taste **umami (savoury)**

- ✓ Mushrooms (especially shiitake), tomatoes (especially sun-dried)
- ✓ Aged cheeses like Parmesan, Gruyère, strong cheddar
- ✓ Soy sauce, miso, fish sauce, anchovies
- ✓ Seaweed (kombu, nori)
- ✓ Umami Paste

Other tips to help manage taste changes

- ✓ **Taste changes may vary over time.** Keeping a record of any changes in your taste and strategies you've tried can help you track improvements.
- ✓ **Using a straw** (if able) can help to bypass your tastebuds.
- ✓ **Try smell training**, using essential oils (lemon and clove) can help with the return of taste after treatment. Smell them for 15 seconds twice each day, or more if you like.
- ✓ **"Oil pulling"** has traditionally been used to help to clean the mouth. There is not very much information about it, but some people find it helpful. Take 10ml of cooking oil of your choice (choose the one that is most pleasant for you) and hold it in your mouth, swirling it for up to 20 minutes. Spit the liquid in your mouth out after this time. Do not swallow.

Further resources you may find useful:



Flavour & Nutrition recipe booklet

<https://www.wcrf-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Flavour-and-Nutrition-recipe-book.pdf>



Ryan Riley recipe booklet

https://www.wcrf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Ryan-Riley-cookbook_2023.pdf

Dry mouth /sensitive mouth products



www.oralieve.co.uk



www.biotene.co.uk



Fifth sense charity for people affected by smell and taste disorders

<https://www.fifthsense.org.uk/>



World Cancer Research Fund

<https://www.wcrf.org>

Common side effects and questions



Eat well during cancer

<https://www.wcrf.org/living-well/health-guides-cookbooks/eat-well-during-cancer/>

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