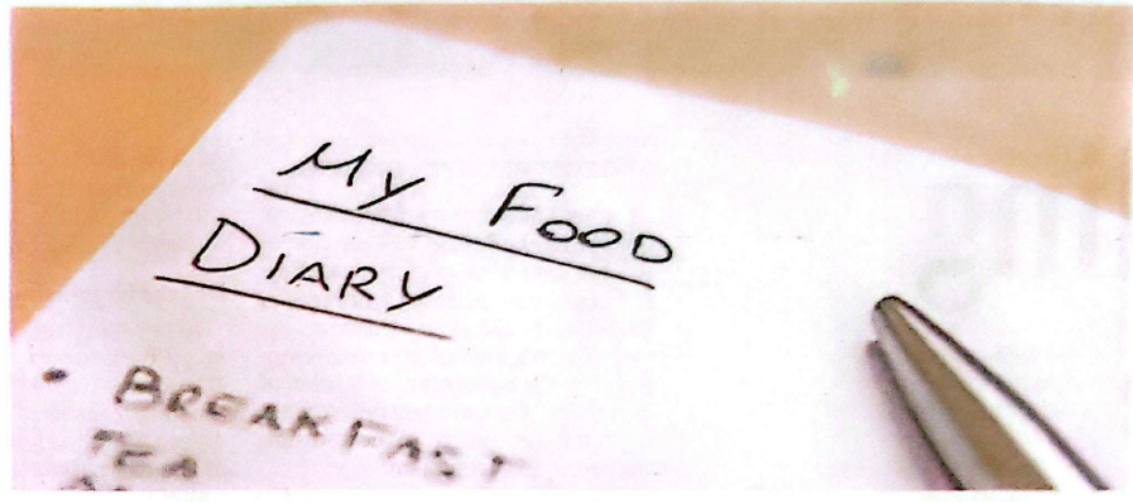
Managing taste, smell, and texture changes during cancer treatment



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Changes in taste, smell, and the way food feels in the mouth can be some of the most frustrating side effects of cancer treatment. Eating, once a source of comfort and pleasure, may suddenly become difficult or even unpleasant. The good news is that these changes are common and manageable. With small adjustments and guidance from your healthcare team, it is possible to maintain nutrition and even regain some enjoyment from food.

Managing the changes

Start by observing patterns in how your taste and smell fluctuate. Many people notice that food tastes worse in the first few days after chemotherapy, gradually improving before the next cycle. Keeping a simple food diary can help you and your treatment team identify patterns and recommend practical solutions. Record what you ate, the time of day, how it tasted or felt, where you were eating, and how long it had been since your last treatment.

Good oral hygiene is essential for managing taste and texture changes. Brush your teeth gently with a soft toothbrush after meals, use mild toothpaste if strong mint flavours irritate, and rinse regularly with warm saltwater. Staying hydrated throughout the day and visiting your dentist for regular check-ups also helps. A clean, moist mouth enhances taste perception and reduces the risk of infection.

Taste changes can vary widely. Some patients find food too salty, too sweet, metallic, bitter, or bland. Simple strategies, such as adjusting seasoning, using herbs, adding lemon, avoiding certain utensils, or experimenting with flavours, can make meals more enjoyable. Smell sensitivity can also trigger nausea and reduce appetite. Minimising exposure to cooking odours, using cold foods, or cooking outdoors can help, and your healthcare team can advise on anti-nausea medications if needed.

Texture changes

Changes in texture or mouth sensitivity can make eating uncomfortable. If food feels dry or like "cardboard," adding sauces, gravies, or broth, choosing soft foods such as mashed potatoes or stews, and sipping water between bites can help. For increased sensitivity, avoid spicy or acidic foods, and let hot foods cool before eating. Dry mouth can be managed by sipping water, using ice chips, chewing sugar-free gum, or asking about saliva substitutes.

Maintaining nutrition is critical, even when food tastes different. Eating small portions more frequently, including protein at each meal, trying nutrient-rich smoothies, and accepting help with meal preparation can make it easier to meet your body's needs. If you are losing weight or struggling to eat enough, ask for a referral to a dietitian.

Taste and smell changes are usually temporary. For many people, these senses gradually improve after treatment, but even if changes persist, practical adjustments can significantly improve comfort and nutrition. Discuss any concerns with your healthcare team. With patience, experimentation, and professional support, you can continue to nourish your body and maintain strength throughout your cancer journey.

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