



Tips on Dealing with Taste Changes

Key Points

- Mouth sores and tastes changes may make it hard to eat or drink enough to get proper nutrition.
- There are simple steps you can take to if you have a metallic taste in your mouth or to help with altered or odd tastes and flavors.
- Tell your doctor if you have stopped eating because of symptoms (taste changes, mouth sores).

Taste changes, which affect about half of those in drug therapy, can make it hard to get the calories and nutrients you need to heal and stay well. Radiation to the head or neck can also cause changes to your senses of smell and taste. Sometimes it is a specific taste such as “metal mouth”, sometimes it is a complete lack of taste, or everything having the exact same taste. If food and drink don’t taste good to you – or worse, if they taste bad – you won’t eat and drink as much as you need. If you don’t eat and drink as much as you need, it can lead to weight loss, electrolyte imbalance, dehydration, and nutritional imbalance. Talk to your doctor if you are having trouble with taste.

What is the Cause?

The exact cause is not known. Theories include damage to the cells in your mouth are damaged by drug therapy or radiation. Another is that a mental association between the taste of food or nausea and treatment may lead to changes in the way you taste foods.

- Some drugs are known to cause taste problems. For example, cisplatin can cause a metallic taste in your mouth while it is being infused. Taste changes also occur in those on immunotherapy drugs.
- Taste changes may last for hours, days, or even months after therapy has ended.
- Most people report they are more sensitive to bitter tastes than sweet tastes.

Tips

- ✓ If something smells good to you right now – eat it right now.
- ✓ Stay away from foods that have odors that bother you.
- ✓ Don’t eat for a few hours before and after your drug therapy.
- ✓ Try different approaches. Some people prefer strong flavors (spice, herbs, citrus) while others prefer bland foods – bananas, rice, or potatoes. Avoid citrus if you have mouth sores.



- ✓ Eat chicken, eggs, fish, nut butters, or other proteins instead of beef, which often causes a metallic taste.
- ✓ Use prepared meals from stores, restaurants, family, or friends.
- ✓ No tobacco products – no smoking, vaping, or chewing tobacco – it can make it worse.
- ✓ Drink more liquids – at least 2 quarts a day to stay hydrated (but not right before eating).
- ✓ Keep your mouth clean and healthy. Brush your teeth before and after every meal.
- ✓ Use plastic forks and spoons if your food tastes like metal.
- ✓ Make mealtime pleasant.
- ✓ Avoid your favorite foods because if it doesn't taste the way you remember it, you will be disappointed and not eat.
- ✓ Add healthy fats to your diet.
- ✓ Eat small meals 4-6 times a day instead of 2-3 large meals
- ✓ Eat sugar free mints or gum.
- ✓ Chew on ice.
- ✓ Marinate meats in sweet fruit juices, salad dressing, barbeque sauce, or sweet and sour sauces.
- ✓ Flavor foods with herbs, spices, sugar, lemon, and tasty sauces.
- ✓ Chilled or frozen food may be more acceptable than warm or hot food.

Specific Taste Problems?

- ✓ **Mouth sores:** Choose easy-to-eat foods: bananas, watermelon, strawberries, pears, applesauce, rice, toast, peanut butter, popsicles, Jell-O®, Boost® or Ensure® (protein shake), cottage cheese, yogurt, creamed soups, cheese, dried fruits, milk
- ✓ **Metallic taste in your mouth:** Use plastic cutlery not metal silverware. Try cold foods. Try using a little sweetener, like maple syrup
- ✓ **Metallic or bitter taste:** Try mints, gum, or ice
- ✓ **Food tastes too sweet:** add drops of lemon or lime
- ✓ **Too salty:** add ½ teaspoon of lemon juice
- ✓ **Too bitter:** add a little sweetener
- ✓ **Food tastes bland:** marinate it before cooking, add spices before you eat. Add sea salt
- ✓ **Red meat tastes odd:** switch to other sources of protein chicken, eggs, fish, turkey, beans, etc.
- ✓ **Any bad taste in your mouth:** Suck on hard candy with strong flavor like mint or lemon. Try rinsing out your mouth with ginger ale

Talking with Your Doctor

- Review ALL your medications with your doctor or clinical pharmacist to see if any combination of medications is adding to your taste changes. If so, discuss if any changes are possible.
- Tell your doctor if you:
 - have stopped eating or drinking because of symptoms (changes in taste, mouth sores, nausea)
 - have lost 5 pounds or more
 - are thinking of trying a zinc or other supplement