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Taste Changes [1]

This section has been reviewed and approved by the [Cancer.Net Editorial Board](#) [2], 09/2015

Some people with cancer experience taste changes during or after cancer treatment. Here are some taste changes you may notice:

- Foods that taste differently than before, especially bitter, sweet, and/or salty foods
- Some foods may taste bland.
- Every food may taste the same.
- A metallic or chemical taste in the mouth, especially after eating meat or other high-protein foods

Taste changes can lead to [loss of appetite](#) [3], [weight loss](#) [4], and food aversions, which is disliking specific foods. Therefore, it is important to let your health care team know if you experience any taste changes. Relieving such side effects is an important part of cancer care and treatment. This is called symptom management or [palliative care](#) [5].

Causes of taste changes

There are several possible causes of taste changes related to cancer and cancer treatment. Understanding the cause may help you and your health care team manage these changes.

- **Chemotherapy.** Taste changes are a common [side effect of chemotherapy](#) [6]. About half of people receiving chemotherapy experience taste changes. Fortunately, taste changes caused by chemotherapy usually stop about 3 to 4 weeks after treatment ends.

The following types of chemotherapy are commonly associated with taste changes:

- Cisplatin (Platinol)
 - Cyclophosphamide (Neosar)
 - Doxorubicin (Adriamycin)
 - Fluorouracil (5-FU, Adrucil)
 - Paclitaxel (Taxol)
 - Vincristine (Oncovin, Vincasar PFS)
- Other medicines can cause taste changes, including:
 - Some opioid medicines, which are pain medicines such as morphine that act on the central nervous system
 - Antibiotics, which are used to treat infections

- **Radiation therapy.** Damage to the taste buds and salivary glands during [radiation therapy](#) [7] to the neck and head often cause taste changes. It may also cause changes to the sense of smell. Changes to the sense of smell may affect how foods taste.

Taste changes caused by radiation treatment usually begin to improve 3 weeks to 2 months after treatment ends. Taste changes may continue to improve for about a year. If a person's salivary glands are damaged, the sense of taste may not entirely return to the way it was before treatment.

- **Other causes.** Other causes of taste changes include:
 - Surgery to the nose, throat, or mouth

- Biological therapies, such as interleukin-2 (IL-2), called aldesleukin (Proleukin)
- Dry mouth
- Damage to the nerves involved in tasting
- Mouth infections
- Dental or gum problems
- Nausea and vomiting

Managing taste problems

Usually, there are no specific treatments for taste problems. However, sometimes treating the cause of the taste changes can help. For example, treating causes such as mouth infections, [dry mouth](#) [8], or dental or gum problems can improve taste changes.

Taste changes can make it difficult for some people to eat healthy foods and maintain their weight. If this is true for you, talk with your doctor or a dietitian. Also, consider the following tips to cope with taste changes. Depending on the cause of taste changes, different tips may work better for some people than for others.

- Choose foods that smell and taste good, even if the food is unfamiliar.
- Eliminate cooking smells by using an exhaust fan, cooking on an outdoor grill, or buying precooked foods. Cold or room-temperature foods also smell less.
- Eat cold or frozen food, which may taste better than hot foods. However, avoid cold foods if you are receiving chemotherapy with oxaliplatin (Eloxatin). This drug makes it difficult to eat or drink anything cold.
- Use plastic utensils and glass cookware to lessen a metallic taste.
- Try sugar-free gum or hard candies with flavors such as mint, lemon, or orange. These flavors can help mask a bitter or metallic taste in the mouth.

- Try protein sources, such as poultry, eggs, fish, peanut butter, beans, or dairy products if red meats don't taste good.
- Marinate meats in fruit juices, sweet wines, salad dressings, or other sauces.
- Flavor foods with herbs, spices, sugar, lemon, or sauces.
- Avoid eating 1 to 2 hours before chemotherapy and up to 3 hours after chemotherapy. This helps prevent food aversions caused by nausea and vomiting. In addition, avoiding favorite foods before chemotherapy helps prevent aversions to those foods.
- Rinse with a salt and baking soda solution before meals. Try a solution of ½ teaspoon of salt and ½ teaspoon of baking soda in 1 cup of warm water. It may help neutralize bad tastes in the mouth.
- Keep a clean and healthy mouth by brushing frequently and flossing daily.
- Consider zinc sulfate supplements, which may help improve taste in some people. However, talk with your doctor before taking any dietary supplements, especially during active treatment.

More Information

[Dental and Oral Health](#) [9]

[Side Effects](#) [10]

Links

[1] <http://www.cancer.net/navigating-cancer-care/side-effects/taste-changes>

[2] <http://www.cancer.net/about-us>

[3] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25043>

[4] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25263>

[5] <http://www.cancer.net/node/31921>

[6] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24676>

[7] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24677>

[8] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25047>

[9] <http://www.cancer.net/node/24499>

[10] <http://www.cancer.net/node/25238>