



# Tips to Minimize Taste Changes

*From cancer or its treatment*

**This handout explains the changes in taste that you may experience. Tips are offered to help you adapt to these changes.**

The sense of taste allows us to distinguish sweet, sour, salty, and bitter foods when they are placed in the mouth or swallowed. The sense of smell allows us to recognize many different scents in the air when we inhale through the nose or when we chew or swallow.

Taste and smell, together with texture and temperature, provide us the complex experience we often refer to as “taste” when we eat.

## **What causes taste changes?**

Having cancer and/or receiving treatment for cancer may affect your sense of taste. These taste alterations or changes can happen with all types of cancer or cancer treatment, including surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy.

Diseases or treatments that affect the mechanism of smell may also alter taste sensations.

## **What kinds of changes might I have?**

- Sweet, sour, bitter, and salty tastes may be different than normal.
- Foods may taste metallic.
- Foods may taste bitter or bland.
- You may develop new food aversions (foods you don’t like).
- You may have the experience that food looks and smells very appealing but seems tasteless, or even tastes unpleasant once placed in your mouth.

## **How might this affect my health?**

With taste changes, you may eat less and/or lose weight. Taste changes may result in less pleasurable eating and poorer overall nutrition.

## **What can I do about taste changes?**

### ***When Preparing Food***

- Substitute good protein sources for red meat, which can taste bitter or unlike it normally tastes. Try poultry, fish, eggs, peanut butter, beans, or dairy products.
- You may find that the taste of chocolate, coffee, and tea may also vary.
- Sweet and sour foods may retain some taste. Try citrus juices (if you do not have mouth sores), cranberry juice, pickles, or relish.
- If foods taste bland, use extra seasonings, herbs, spices, and tasty sauces. For example, enhance the flavor of chicken by cooking it with chicken broth or bouillon.
- Marinate meats in sweet fruit juices, salad dressing, barbecue sauces, or sweet and sour sauces to enhance flavors.
- Chilled foods may be more appealing than warm foods. Try deviled eggs, chicken, ham, egg salad, ice cream, milkshakes, pudding, custard, or cheese.

### ***When Eating***

- Use plastic utensils if foods taste metallic.
- Chew food longer to allow more contact with your taste buds.
- Choose pleasant surroundings to enjoy eating.
- Eat with family and friends.
- Be flexible. Eat when hungry rather than at regular meal times.
- Control unpleasant odors in your environment. The use of a kitchen fan when cooking or an outdoor barbecue grill may help. Try also using covered pots or microwave ovens.
- Try sugar-free mints or short periods of sucking on ice chips. These actions may minimize, even cover up, metallic tastes.

## Questions?

Call 206-598-4100

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC Clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

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### *Between Meals*

Increasing fluids and moisture may help. Try these tips:

- Suck on sugar-free and tart candies (or drink lemon-flavored water) to stimulate your salivary glands. A few drops of lemon juice in water may be refreshing. However, if you have mouth sores, avoid sour and mint flavors, because they might increase your discomfort.
- Increase your fluid intake to 2 to 3 liters each day. This includes juices and soups as well as water.
- Keep your mouth clean by rinsing often. Brush your teeth after each meal.
- Use mouth rinses with saline (salt solution) or baking soda, or artificial saliva to help keep membranes moist. Moisture in the mouth enhances smelling sensations and can enhance taste sensations.
- Avoid cigarette smoking because it can interfere with smell and taste.

### *At Clinic Visits*

- Feel free to discuss taste changes with your doctor, nurse, or dietitian.
- Alert your doctor or nurse if you are having mouth or throat soreness, dryness, less saliva, or other symptoms that concern you. Your doctor may order vitamins, minerals, and/or medicines for symptom relief and comfort.
- The Registered Dietitian in our clinic can also help in planning a pleasant and healthy menu. Nutritional supplements may be recommended.
- You may be referred to a doctor who is a specialist in Oral Health who may be able to assist you.

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