Cancer Therapy: Managing Side Effects - Taste Changes

Types of Taste

There are five types of taste: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and savory. Look at your tongue and you will see little bumps known as papillae. Within these papillae are tiny taste buds. These taste buds respond to all types of taste.

Taste changes may be caused by the following:

- Direct effects of a tumor
- Oral infections
- Chemotherapy
- Biotherapy
- Radiation therapy
- Surgery
- Antibiotic therapy

Taste changes can make eating difficult. After treatment ends, changes may or may not improve over time. Some taste changes may be permanent, especially if you have had direct radiation therapy to your mouth.

If your taste changes are so severe that you eat less and lose more than five pounds, tell your doctor, nurse or dietitian. They can provide you with information on how to increase your calories.
How to Manage Taste Changes

Meats

People with cancer often say that meats such as beef and pork have a bitter taste. If you have problems eating meat, try the following:

• Marinate the meat in a sweet or sour sauce.
• Cook the meat in a sweet or sour sauce such as sweet wine or citrus fruit juice.
• Eat cold cooked meat.
• Eat meats earlier in the day. Taste changes can be worse later in the day.

If these tips do not help, do not eat meat for a while. Eat other protein foods such as eggs, peanut butter and cheese.

Other Taste Changes

• You may have an increase or decrease in your desire for sweets. Some people may have a “burnt” taste in their mouth when they drink coffee or eat chocolate.
• Smells may affect your taste. The smell of some cooked foods may trigger your taste buds, making you feel like you “taste” the food without it ever being in your mouth.
• An increased or decreased desire for salt on foods.
• Some people may have a “metal” or “medicine” taste in their mouth.

Tips

• If you have a bitter taste in your mouth, try eating lemon drops or mints or chewing gum.
• Use different seasonings, herbs, and spices.
• Try salad dressings (especially sweet and sour flavor) on other foods.
• Add sauces and gravies to vegetables or other foods.
• Add spices, such as mint, dill, vanilla, lemon and basil to your food.
• If you are not able to eat a balanced diet, talk to your doctor about taking vitamins that include zinc, copper, nickel, niacin, and vitamin A.

• Rinse your mouth with a mouthwash that does not contain alcohol before meals.

• Try foods at different temperatures.

• Try foods with different textures.

• To avoid the smell of the foods being cooked, have someone else make your meals.

• To reduce a “metal” taste in your mouth, it may help to use plastic utensils when you eat.

Where can I get more information and resources?

Talk to your doctor or nurse if you have any questions. If you would like more information, ask for these patient education handouts:

• Fight Cancer-Related Fatigue with Good Nutrition

• Using Exercise to Fight Cancer-Related Fatigue

• Cancer Survivorship

• Cancer Internet Resources

• JamesCare for Life Programs - JamesCare for Life offers a wide range of programs to support patients, families and caregivers during and after cancer.

For more information about The James, we encourage you to visit our website at cancer.osu.edu