



TASTE AND SMELL

(Taste buds not always to blame)

“Food just doesn’t taste the same anymore”

“Everything I eat tastes bitter”

“I want to eat only sweets”

If these words sound like something you might say, don’t be too quick to blame your taste buds. It’s possible you’ve lost some of your sense of smell. And changes in smell affect taste.



Why foods lose their appeal:

Your sensory response to foods is complex. In addition to smell and taste, your brain coordinates sensory signals for sight, temperature, and texture, and interprets them as “flavor”.

Yet when foods no longer taste the same, loss of smell is usually the reason. Studies on taste and smell disorders report that smell losses outnumber actual taste problems by a ratio of 3 to 1.

Smell disorders emerge from factors such as nasal disease (sinusitis and rhinitis), obstruction of the nasal airways, viral infections, head trauma and aging.

When you’re born, a continuous sheet of mucus-covered smell receptors, called olfactory epithelium, covers a wide area of your upper nasal cavities inside the bridge of your nose. But by the time you reach your 20s or 30s, the olfactory epithelium has already decreased in area.

The cumulative effects of aging, with repeated viral and chemical injuries, can cause widespread damage to the nasal mucous membrane. Gradually, these factors diminish the sensitivity of your sense of smell.

It has been reported that over 60% of cases in which people complained of a loss of smell were due to one of the following three causes:

- a) Nasal sinus disease – in acute upper respiratory infections, sinusitis, allergic rhinitis or bacterial rhinitis, a swollen mucous membrane can obstruct the nasal cavity, interfering with odors reaching the smell receptors. Structural changes such as deviations of the nasal septum, polyps and benign or malignant tumors can also obstruct the nasal cavity.
- b) Viral infections – repeated injury to smell receptors caused by viral infections commonly leads to smell disorders in older adults. The older you get, the more likely a viral infection will have a lasting effect on your smell.
- c) Head trauma – some forms of head injury, such as those that cause bleeding into the nasal mucous membrane or a blow to the head causing a concussion, also may damage smell receptors. The smell loss that occurs may be complete, followed by varying degrees of spontaneous recovery. Head trauma more frequently causes smell disorders in children and young adults.

Can you regain your smell?

If you notice changes in your sense of smell or the way food tastes, consider a medical evaluation for a smell disorder. Doctors may treat smell disorders caused by nasal sinus disease with allergy medications, antibiotics or corticosteroids. Surgery to remove polyps or a tumor, or to correct a deviated septum, also may restore your sense of smell.

When viral infections, head trauma, or inhalation of toxic chemicals destroy part of the nasal mucous membrane, there's little that can be done to restore your sense of smell. And after 6 months, a spontaneous recovery is unlikely.

If you no longer seem to have a keen sense of smell, try to keep it in perspective. Your sense of smell generally survives better compared to your vision or hearing. And research shows that having a smell disorder doesn't necessarily mean your eating behavior and nutritional status will suffer.

Even though few ways are proven to enhance flavor perception when your sense of smell is less sensitive, these suggestions can help:

- expand your food choices to vary temperature, color and texture
- plan meals in relaxing and attractive environments
- whenever possible, dine in pleasant company

Your sense of taste is complex.

Taste buds alone don't amount for how foods taste. As noted, your sense of smell, as well as the way your tongue "feels" the texture and temperature of foods, are also involved. Your brain coordinates these sensory signals and interprets them as a single flavor. Here's how:

Taste – taste buds, found mainly on your tongue, are tiny clusters of cells (papillae) that pick up flavors from the foods you eat. The popular view is that taste is limited to four basic sensations – sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. But scientists suspect that there may be more.

Regardless of their specific location, most taste buds seem to respond to multiple taste sensations. Certain regions, however, may be especially sensitive to one of the basic qualities. You taste salty and sweet qualities mainly on the front of your tongue, sour on the sides and bitter on the back.

On average, about 9,000 taste buds cover the tongue. Yet everyone has different numbers of each kind with varying patterns of distribution. Genes may influence the sensitivity of taste buds. That could explain why certain foods are appealing to some people and are not tasty to others.

Smell – unlike your limited repertoire of tastes, the number of odors you can detect seems to be boundless. When you put food in your mouth, its odors pass through the cavity between your nose and mouth (your nasopharynx) to olfactory receptor cells at the top of your nasal passages. When an odor contacts these microscopic sensors, it starts a chain reaction of nerve impulses to your brain.

Because you can feel the food on your tongue, it's easy to think that you taste it. But your sense of smell is thought to be about 10,000 times more sensitive than your sense of taste. What you think you taste is actually what you smell. Remember the last time your nose was congested from a cold? Did you complain about foods having no taste? The blocked air flow to your olfactory receptor cells prevented you from smelling what you thought you tasted.

Pain, temperature, touch – the "burn" of a hot pepper or the "cooling" of a wintergreen candy are not the same sensations as taste or smell. Trigeminal nerve endings lying close to the surfaces of your lips, mouth and nose sense pain, temperature and texture. People who have lost their smell or taste can still identify many foods because of these nerve endings.