
Altered Taste and Smell

Some cancer treatments can cause a change in taste and smell. You may notice that foods taste bitter or metallic, overly sweet, too salty, strong or bland. These changes may affect your appetite. Below are some tips for managing taste changes during your treatment.

Managing taste changes

- Drink fluids with meals and throughout the day.
- Add seasonings, spices and herbs to enhance taste such as lemon, onion, garlic, mint, basil, sauces or condiments (such as BBQ sauce, ketchup, mustard, ranch, and vinegar), dill, rosemary, chili powder, cinnamon, nutmeg and oregano.
- Sweeten foods with sugar substitutes, fresh fruit such as apples, strawberries and blueberries, coconut flakes or fruit marinades.
- Keep your mouth clean by brushing and flossing daily. Make sure to brush your teeth and your tongue.
- Try rinsing with water, baking soda and salt before meals.
- Avoid using the microwave, as it will spread food odors.
- Serve food cold or at room temperature to decrease the taste and smell.
- Try fresh fruit smoothies with ice cream or yogurt.
- Cover beverages and drink through a straw to reduce smells.
- Avoid eating your favorite foods during treatment to prevent developing food aversions.
- Try sugar-free gum, hard candy, mints or lemon drops.

If foods taste bitter or metallic

- Avoid drinking and eating out of metal cans; use plastic utensils and glass cookware.
- Try mint, lemon or orange sugar-free gum or hard candies.
- Eat sweeter foods; use sugar or sugar substitutes.
- Red meat is prone to tasting metallic. Substitute other protein-rich foods such as chicken, fish, eggs, cheese, peanut butter, dried beans/legumes or Greek yogurt.
- Try cooking red meat in a sweet and sour sauce, citrus marinade or vinegar.



If foods taste too sweet

- Add salt to food or dilute it with water.
- Try more acidic foods such as tomatoes, citrus fruits, apples, dried fruit, dairy, mushrooms, pasta, oats, rice, black beans, kidney beans, banana, grapes, vinegar, honey, chicken or eggs.

If foods taste too salty

- Try low salt and sodium-reduced products.
- Add sugar or sugar substitutes to foods to mask the salty flavor.

If foods taste strong

- Eat mild-tasting foods such as crackers, bread, cereal, mashed potatoes, milk, rice, cottage cheese, gelatin, plain noodles with butter, puddings, plain yogurt, peanut butter, eggs, broth-based soup, custard, fruit/vegetable juice, cooked fruits and vegetables.
- Avoid fried foods, raw fruits and vegetables, seeds and nuts, strong cheeses (such as bleu cheese), spices, sauerkraut, pickles and sugary foods.

If foods taste bland

- Try sour-tasting foods such as vinegar, yogurt, fermented vegetables, sourdough bread, lemons, grapefruit and tart cherries.
- Serve food with stronger flavors such as chili, spaghetti, apple pie and try adding the seasonings, spices and herbs mentioned above.
- Alternate bites of different tasting foods during your meals such as cottage cheese with peaches/pears, grilled cheese and tomato soup, banana and peanut butter.

For any nutrition questions, contact your VA dietitian.