

# Smell Disorder

## What is a smell disorder?

A smell disorder is a condition that changes your normal sense of smell. The changes may be temporary or permanent. Your sense of smell is so closely connected to your sense of taste that a smell disorder usually changes your sense of taste as well.

More than 2 million Americans have some sort of permanent smell or taste disorder. Most often, these disorders are not caused by other, more serious problems. They can happen just because you are getting older. However, the sudden loss of these senses can be a sign of a serious problem, such as a brain tumor. Although such serious problems are rare, you should report any change in taste or smell to your healthcare provider.

## What is the cause?

A number of things can change your sense of smell.

Smell receptors are in the lining of your nose. They are nerves that pick up smells. These receptors are connected to the olfactory nerves. The olfactory nerves are connected to the part of the brain that interprets smells.

Your sense of smell is at its best between the ages of 30 and 60. Around the age of 60 you start to lose your sense of smell. Aside from normal aging, your sense of smell may decrease because of a blockage in the nose or because nerves have been damaged.

The most common causes of a poor sense of smell are:

- Sinus infections
- The common cold
- Allergies
- Smoking

Other things that can cause a loss of smell are:

- Tumors
- Head injury
- Polyps in your nose or sinuses
- Changes in your hormones
- Surgery or radiation therapy involving your head or neck
- A lot of exposure to chemicals, such as insecticides
- Medicines

In addition, some psychological disorders and seizure disorders cause people to think they smell unpleasant odors that are not really there.

Not much is known about what might cause an increased sense of smell.

## What are the symptoms?

- Things may smell differently from how they used to smell.
- Smells may seem stronger or weaker than normal.
- You may have trouble smelling anything. This is called “anosmia” – no smell.
- You may have changes in your ability to taste food. You may find that you are adding more sugar or salt to make food taste better.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and will examine you. Your ability to smell is tested by seeing if you can identify easily recognized odors, like coffee. More specialized testing can be done with other odors. Your provider will try to determine if the problem is in one nostril or both.

It may help to keep a log about:

- When and what you smell
- Where you are and what you are doing when you especially notice the problem
- How long you have had the problem
- Whether the problem comes and goes
- What medicines you are taking

## How is it treated?

If an underlying cause can be found for the smell disorder, your healthcare provider will treat it. For example, if the smell disorder is caused by medicine, your provider may suggest that you change your dosage or stop taking the medicine. If the cause is related to allergies or sinus problems, a steroid nasal spray or salt-water nasal wash may help.

## What can I do to help myself?

- If you smoke, quit.
- If the smell disorder is affecting your appetite, make your food more appealing by adding extra herbs and spices. For health reasons, try to avoid adding a lot of sugar or salt.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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