

# Taste Disorder

## What is a taste disorder?

A taste disorder is a condition that changes your normal sense of taste. A change in your sense of taste, which is closely connected to your sense of smell, may be temporary or permanent.

More than 2 million Americans suffer from some permanent smell or taste disorder. Most often, these disorders are not caused by other, more serious problems. 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.

The technical medical term for loss of taste is ageusia. If you haven't lost your sense of taste but it has changed, the medical term is dysgeusia.

## What is the cause?

Taste buds are special structures that pick up the taste of chemicals responsible for flavors when food or drink is dissolved in saliva. Most of your taste buds are on your tongue. There are a few in the back of your mouth.

The sense of taste is not as well developed as the sense of smell. Taste buds can distinguish only salty, sweet, sour, and bitter tastes. Flavors can be further distinguished because the sense of taste works with the sense of smell. A loss of the sense of smell almost always has a big effect on your ability to taste.

Your sense of taste is at its best between the ages of 30 and 60 years old. Around the age of 60, you start to lose your ability to taste, especially in the ability to taste sour and bitter. Because older adults can still taste salty and sweet things, they will sometimes add more sugar or salt to food in order to make their food taste better.

Aside from normal aging, the most common causes of a loss of the sense of taste are:

- Nasal airway problems, especially nasal congestion caused by allergies or the common cold
- Upper airway infection, such as sinus infection, tonsillitis, or sore throat

Other causes are:

- Dryness of the mouth
- Disease of the gums or teeth
- Tumors in the brain
- Polyps in the nose
- Seasonal allergies
- Head injury
- Nerve damage
- Exposure to chemicals

- Medicines
- Smoking
- Radiation therapy

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

## **What are the symptoms?**

When you have a taste disorder, food and drink taste different than they used to. Some things may taste strange or have a metallic taste. Your sense of taste may be better or worse, or you may not be able to taste at all. If your sense of taste is lost or decreased, you may lose your interest in eating and your body may no longer get all of the nutrients it needs. This could cause symptoms of other medical problems.

## **How is it diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and will examine you. Your ability to taste is tested by having you identify weak solutions of salt, sugar, and vinegar. Your provider will test different parts of your tongue.

Smell and taste affect each other, so your sense of smell should be investigated if you are having taste problems. Your provider will ask about any changes or problems with your sense of smell. Your provider will examine your nasal passages and test your sense of smell.

Information that will help your healthcare provider make a diagnosis includes:

- What you are able taste
- How long you have had the problem
- Whether the problem comes and goes
- What medicines you are taking

Rarely, special tests with taste solutions are done. If there is concern about possible polyps in the sinuses or a tumor, a CT scan may be done.

## **How is it treated?**

If an underlying cause can be found for the taste disorder, your provider will treat it. For example, if the taste disorder is caused by medicine, your provider may suggest that you change your dosage or stop taking the medicine. If the taste disorder is caused by dental problems, you will be referred to a dentist.

If the taste problem is caused by a nose problem, medicines, such as nasal sprays, may help. Try a nasal salt-water rinse first. If allergy symptoms keep giving you problems in spite of your current medicine, ask your healthcare provider about steroid nasal sprays for allergy symptoms.

## What can I do to help myself?

- If you smoke, quit.
- Make your food more appealing by adding extra herbs and spices. Avoid using too much sugar or salt.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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