Making Food Taste Good Again After Cancer Treatment

Cancer treatments, especially chemotherapy, can make some foods taste metallic, bitter, sweet, salty or bland. These kitchen tricks can help.

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Taste changes, a common side effect for people who receive chemotherapy as a cancer treatment, can make it challenging to consume enough food to maintain weight and muscle mass. These changes can linger up to a year after treatment is complete.

But with a few simple kitchen tricks, you can return to enjoying food again. Try these tips and recipes from Cook for Your Life (cookforyourlife.org), a Fred Hutch nutrition and culinary website geared toward people touched by cancer that features recipes for people at high risk of developing cancer, people undergoing treatment and people supporting those in survivorship.

Problem: Foods and water have a metallic or bitter taste.

Fresh Strawberry, Apple and Lime JuiceShutterstock.com

Solution: Try adding a sweetener such as maple syrup, acids such as lemon or lime or your favorite vinegar to foods on the plate. And squeezing a little lemon or lime into a glass of water cuts through metallic taste to help you stay hydrated.

Fresh Strawberry, Apple and Lime Juice. This recipe, from cancer survivor Hollye Jacobs, is as simple as it gets: Add 2 ½ cups of fresh strawberries (stems removed, cut in half), 1 apple (peeled and cored and cut into large pieces), the juice of 1 lime and 1 cup of water to a blender. Makes one serving.

Problem: Foods taste bland, “like cardboard.”

Solution: Spice it up. Try hot sauce and spices such as cayenne or cumin. Salting your food at the table will help bring flavors forward so you can taste them again. Don’t stop until flavors show up.

Southern Spiced PopcornShutterstock.com

Southern Spiced Popcorn. Pop ½ cup of popcorn kernels with 3 tablespoons of coconut oil over medium-high heat in a covered large saucepot; shake continuously until the popping slows down. Remove from heat, empty into a bowl and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon kosher salt, ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper, ½ teaspoon Old Bay seasoning and ½ teaspoon smoked paprika. Makes 8 servings.

Problem: Foods taste overly sweet or overly salty.

Solution: Lemon or lime juice or vinegar can help balance overly sweet tastes, and lemon or lime juice can also help with overly salty tastes. In addition, miso, with its rich umami flavor, makes many foods taste better.

Miso Lime Sauce

Miso Lime Sauce. This recipe is excellent with crunchy steamed vegetables, poultry or tofu. In a small saucepan, whisk together 2 tablespoons white miso, 2 tablespoons dry sherry, 1 teaspoon sugar and 1 teaspoon soy sauce. Then whisk in 1 to 2 tablespoons of freshly squeezed lime juice—a teaspoon at a time to taste. Heat through until it almost boils; if the sauce is stiff, add a little water. Spoon the sauce over food. Eat immediately!

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