What You Can Do When Everything Tastes Awful During Cancer Treatment

Are you experiencing taste changes? This may help...

November 24, 2017 By Danielle Penick

If you're going through cancer treatment, odds are you may wind up experiencing some undesirable side effects—thankfully these are usually temporary and manageable. The downside though is this can impact how well you eat as a result from food aversions and decreased appetite. Adequate nutrition during cancer treatment is paramount and should be considered a key part of your treatment plan—this may not be on your radar, but add it to your blueprint and you will likely experience better treatment outcomes according to research. Many cancer survivors going through chemotherapy, radiation therapy, or surgery who are well nourished tolerate their therapies better, have less treatment delays, less fatigue, heal better, and typically have fewer side effects. Taste changes, mouth sores, nausea and vomiting, dry mouth, bowel issues, swallowing issues, foods can smell bad, and lack of appetite can all affect your intake negatively. The good news is there is a lot you can do to help cope with these side effects in order to maximize your nutrition status!

Today's post will only focus on taste changes, but the other topics will soon be revisited. Some cancer survivors may never experience this as a side effect, but many will notice that foods suddenly start to taste bland, metallic, too sweet, too salty, bitter, or as I often hear "everything tastes like cardboard." Most commonly, meat and other protein rich foods will begin to have a bitter or metallic taste. This is often a result of your cancer treatments targeting your rapidly dividing cells to help fight your cancer. Unfortunately, this can also affect your healthy cells that also rapidly divide like the one's in your mouth. Here's what can you do:

1. Be prepared!

Find out what your cancer treatment plan is and what side effects are common with your treatment so that you can make a game plan in advance. If you start experiencing taste changes you can have a strategy ready, which will save you time and energy. You may not truly know if you will have taste changes or what types of taste changes you will experience until later, but you will be able to react sooner and be less at risk for inadequate nutrition.

2. Expect to try new foods and avoid some of your favorite foods (at least temporarily).

More often than not, my patients have told me that they can no longer eat their favorite foods as

they don’t taste good to them anymore and other’s have told me that they avoid them because they don’t want to have negative associations with their favorite foods once they get their taste back again. I encourage people to try foods that they aren’t used to eating or have never tried so that they don’t know what to expect and may end up liking it. What tastes bad one week may not taste bad the following week either. Try to keep an open mind to new foods in order to optimize your nutrition status.

3. If foods taste too metallic or metal like, try this…

Use plastic ware or chopsticks instead of silverware—this may make a huge difference as anything metal may make your problem worse! Avoiding metal pots and pans may be beneficial too. If meat or fish are no longer tolerable, try soaking them in citrus or vinegar-based marinades (if you don’t have any mouth sores) or sweet and sour sauces to take the metallic taste away. Water may even taste like metal, so try adding lemon, lime, or grapefruit wedges. You can also try rinsing your mouth out prior to eating to help food taste better by mixing ¼ tsp baking soda, ⅛ tsp salt, and 1 cup water or an alcohol-free mouthwash. If red meat tastes bad then try fish, chicken, turkey, peanut butter, beans, eggs, cheese, and yogurt for your protein sources. Eating foods cold may also help to lessen metallic or bitter aftertastes. Try things like pasta salad, egg salad, chicken salad, tuna salad, green salads, and fruit salads. Sucking on hard candies or chewing gum may also help.

4. Are foods too sweet or too salty?

I find that most of my patients have reported if foods taste too sweet, add some salt or something tart. If foods are too salty, then add something sweet tasting to balance your food out.

5. Does your food taste bland?

Try adding lots of herbs and spices to your meals, snacks, and smoothies. Stronger flavors like vinegar, citrus, spicy foods (if no mouth sores are present) or sour sauces may be beneficial.

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6. Now may not be the time to make significant diet changes…eat what you can!

The goal now is to make sure that you are eating enough calories. If you add further diet restrictions outside of how you would normally eat then this will only limit your calorie options further, which is not ideal during cancer treatment. Eating healthier is a good thing and you can try to balance out plant-based foods and whole grains with higher calorie options, but you don't want to be too restrictive. Consider making significant changes after your treatment is finished.

7. Nutrition supplements or smoothies may be your new best friend.

If you find it difficult to eat almost all food then drinking your nutrition may be easier. You can buy over the counter supplements like Carnation Instant Breakfast, Ensure, Boost VHC (very high calorie), Equate, Orgain, or others. If you prefer, you can make smoothies at home and experiment with different ingredients to see what works for you. I've also had many patients add things like orange sherbet to vanilla flavored supplements or peanut butter with cocoa powder or even avocado. For every meal that you cannot eat at least 50% of what you would typically eat, I generally recommend drinking a full nutrition supplement or smoothie. Some people may need them in between meals as well to meet their full calorie and protein goals. You can trend your weights and speak with a dietitian on your care team or your oncologist. If there isn't a dietitian on staff, consider calling your insurance company to see if they have one on staff available for you to talk with or find one in your area that your insurance will cover. For more information on making smoothies, check out my blog post on it here.

Remember, your main goal is to eat what sounds good to you and what your body allows you to eat. This is essential so that you can complete your treatment without interruptions and to help with lessening any potential side effects from treatment. You want to allow your body to help preserve its muscle mass so that you can keep your strength up and decrease fatigue. Constantly try new foods and use nutrition supplements or smoothies as needed until you are able to eat normally again.

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