Taste Changes During Cancer Therapy

People going through cancer treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiation therapy, frequently report changes in taste. These changes can include food and drinks tasting bitter or like metal, an aversion to certain foods, or a change in the taste of your favorite foods.

Radiation therapy to the head and neck area can damage your taste buds and sense of smell or cause xerostomia (dry mouth caused by a decrease in or loss of saliva), which can exacerbate taste changes and interest in eating. Dental problems can also add to taste changes, so a visit to the dentist may be in order. Be sure to check with your oncology team to identify the best time during therapy to see a dentist. Mucositis (mouth sores) can also cause changes in taste.

Taste changes can impact your enjoyment of eating or drinking. In turn, you may not eat or drink enough for proper nutrition. Although the problem with taste changes typically resolves over time after therapy ends, it can persist for a year or longer. There are some things you can do to help manage taste changes and, in the process, decrease or prevent weight loss.

- Rinse your mouth before meals with salt water, sparkling water or ginger ale, or brush your teeth.
- Avoid cigarette or cigar smoking, as this can make taste changes worse.
- Try making the flavors of your food more powerful with the addition of spices, herbs, marinades, lemon juice, sauces or pickled foods.
- Choose foods with strong flavors, lemon, for instance (lemon meringue, a lemon marinade, etc.).
- Avoid any acidic additives if you have mouth sores. While it seems logical that spicy foods should be avoided with mouth sores, research has found that capsaicin (which is derived from chili peppers) can be used to treat pain from mouth sores, so it may be helpful for some.
- Try to overpower a metallic taste with lemon drops, sugar free hard candy, mints or gum. For those dealing with xerostomia, these can also help stimulate saliva.
- If a metallic taste is your concern, use plastic utensils and drink beverages from bottles, not cans.
- Beef is particularly prone to tasting metallic, so you may want to replace it with other forms of protein like chicken, eggs or dairy products.
- Consult with the cancer center dietitian for help with food selections.

Taste changes can make you lose interest in eating. Some activities that can increase your desire or ability to eat enough for proper nutrition include:

- Eat small, frequent meals throughout the day. Have "snacks" on hand for when you feel hungry.
- Make meal time a social and enjoyable experience. Invite your visitors to come at mealtime and eat with you.
- Eat foods that you enjoy. Milkshakes, puddings, sauces and gravies can provide extra calories or lubrication to assist eating.
- Attractive presentation of foods can increase your appetite. Try meals that include bright colored foods at a set table to appeal to your other senses.