

TASTE DISORDERS



Our Learning Zone suite of Information Sheets were created by a collaborative panel of experts: medical, scientific and people who live with smell and taste disorders. We would like to thank them all for giving and sharing their time, experience and knowledge.

Fifth Sense is the charity for people affected by smell and taste disorders. Based in the UK, we are the first charity providing direct support, information and a signpost to potential diagnosis and treatment to people affected by these conditions. We play a leading role in educating

people about the importance of the senses of smell and taste to our lives. Through this we can promote awareness of the consequences of smell and taste disorders, demonstrate the need for greater availability of medical services and advocate for further research into treatment for these conditions.

Fifth Sense is a membership organisation. Membership is free and open to anyone affected by or with an interest in smell or taste-related disorders, including family members, carers and health or scientific professionals.

What is taste?

Taste comes from tiny molecules released when you chew or drink. Gustatory (taste) cells in the tastebuds on the tongue and in the mouth and throat are stimulated. Humans have about 10,000 taste buds when they are born but, like other body cells they start to decline with age.

Taste buds contain receptors that respond to each of the five basic taste qualities: sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and umami (savoury). Taste is just one way that you experience food when eating. Another nerve pathway (trigeminal) gives rise to sensations such as the coolness of mint and the burning or irritation of chili peppers and create the sensations of heat, cold, and texture. When you eat and you breathe out through your nose, taste combines with aroma to produce flavour - a process called retro-nasal olfaction. It is the smell of food that helps define the difference in the taste experience between honey and maple syrup or an orange and a lemon.

What are taste disorders?

People who are experiencing the inability to taste (ageusia) or whose ability to taste is reduced (hypogeusia) or distorted (dysgeusia). Some experience phantom taste perception: a lingering, often unpleasant taste even though there is nothing in your mouth. True taste loss, however, is rare. Most often, people are experiencing a loss of smell rather than a loss of taste.

What causes taste disorders?

Many people with taste disorders don't have an obvious cause, but some develop them after operations in the head and neck area or due to taking certain medications. Among the causes of taste problems are:

- Vitamin and mineral deficiencies such as zinc
- Some treatments for cancers of the head and neck e.g. radiotherapy, chemotherapy
- Poor oral hygiene and dental problems
- Some medications, including some common antibiotics and antihistamines
- Head injury
- Smoking
- Some surgeries to the ear, nose, and throat (such as middle ear surgery) or extraction of the third molar (wisdom tooth)
- Some neurological conditions such as strokes and epilepsy
- Aging – as we get older, cell regeneration declines and our sense of taste can fade
- Middle ear infections and diseases (e.g. cholesteatoma)
- Exposure to certain chemicals, such as insecticides

How are taste disorders diagnosed?

Both taste and smell disorders are diagnosed by an ENT specialist. They can determine the severity of your taste disorder by using taste strips at varying concentrations on your tongue to see if you can recognise them.

An accurate assessment of your taste loss will include, among other things, a physical examination of your ears, nose, and throat; a dental examination and assessment of oral hygiene; a review of your health history; and a taste test supervised by a health care professional.

Can taste disorders be treated?

Diagnosis is important to identify and treat the underlying cause, if one can be found. Often, the correction of a general medical problem can correct the loss of taste. For example, people who lose their sense of taste because of a mineral deficiency may regain it when this condition resolves. Occasionally, a person may recover his or her sense of taste spontaneously. Proper oral hygiene is important to regaining and maintaining a well-functioning sense of taste. If your taste disorder can't be successfully treated, counselling may help so do not hesitate to ask your GP or family doctor.

Are taste disorders serious?

Taste disorders can weaken or remove an early warning system that most of us take for granted. Smell and taste help you detect spoiled food and for some people, the presence of ingredients that they are allergic to.

Loss of taste can also cause you to add too much sugar or salt to try to make food taste better. This can be a problem for people with certain medical conditions, such as diabetes or high blood pressure. It can also lead to feelings of isolation and low mood. If you are experiencing a taste disorder, talk with your doctor.

What relevant research is happening in this area?

The Fifth Sense James Lind Alliance Smell and Taste Disorders Priority Setting Partnership is currently considering the main questions that people affected by smell and taste disorders want research to address. More details can be found at www.fifthsense.org.uk/smell-taste-ppsp/

Are there any organisations/podcasts/support groups/charities etc that can offer support and keep me updated on the latest findings?

You can read about the experiences of people from across the world who are experiencing or have recovered from smell and taste disorders on our website www.fifthsense.org.uk/stories. There are also several private Facebook groups and other social media sources that provide a place for those who wish to engage in conversations online with others. Inclusion of these sources does not reflect an endorsement and a list can be found on **Learning Zone Information Sheet #10, 'Other Support and Help'**.

How can my family and friends support me?

We know that it can be challenging for other people to understand the impact that a smell or taste disorder can have. Try talking to your partner, family and friends about how your condition affects you, so they can try to understand and support you. Ask someone to be a 'designated nose' - check the milk to see if it has gone off, tell you how you smell and help keep you safe from gas and smoke risks.

HELPFUL HINTS

TIPS FOR MANAGING YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH FOOD

- Keep making and eating interesting foods - texture, temperatures, heat (chilli/mustard/pepper/spice) can all bring interest to a meal.
- Use mindfulness and your other senses to tune into the characteristics of each meal and drink.
- Focus on the sensations you can perceive, not those that are missing:
 - Roasted vegetable curry with poppadoms, cool yoghurt and mint mango chutney, lime pickle.
 - Lamb tagine with chickpeas, dates, toasted flaked almonds, pomegranate seeds, and cool yoghurt and mint.
- Nutrition: Moderate the use of salt/sugar as it's easy to overdo this if their taste cannot be detected. A balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables is more important than ever and can support the healing process.
- When cooking for others, follow trusted recipes carefully if you can no longer rely on taste to correct estimations.

TIPS FOR MANAGING YOUR WELLBEING

- Engage in interests that don't depend on taste – e.g. exercise, learn a language, do an online course, learn to play an instrument, take up crafting etc.
- Reach out if you need help. There are lots of support services available (see table on page 1).
- Indulge in some Self-Care – Take time out to relax, look after yourself, meditate, treat yourself to beauty treatments, spend some time outdoors appreciating nature.