

## Taste changes with chemotherapy and radiation treatment



This information sheet provides information on taste changes and how to cope with them during cancer treatment.

Several cancer treatments (some chemotherapy drugs or radiation to your mouth, nose or throat) can change how food tastes. Many people find they have a metallic taste, and food may taste bitter or salty. Some people find their food all tastes the same.

Usually, your sense of taste begins to come back to normal within a few weeks of finishing chemotherapy. Radiation treatment can cause a loss of taste for longer. The taste buds need time to recover from radiation damage. This usually improves slowly although it can take many months or longer for your sense of taste to return. If you have had any treatment that affects your sense of smell, this will also affect your sense of taste.

### Tips for coping with taste changes

- If all your food tastes the same, try foods that have strong flavours such as salamis, olives, anchovies, smoked foods, strong cheeses, or curries.
- Try adding garlic, lemon juice, herbs and spices to food. However, it's best to avoid spicy foods if you have a sore mouth, mouth ulcers or thrush.
- Make a marinade with a couple of tablespoons of olive oil, and some herbs or spices—add some lemon juice or soy sauce if you like. Marinate food overnight to develop the flavour.
- A dry mixture of spices and herbs can be rubbed onto uncooked meat or fish to add flavour.
- People often find their mouth feels very dry when having treatment. Gravies and sauces can help add moisture and flavour to your food.
- Sugar-free sweets or chewing gum may help reduce a bad taste in your mouth.
- Avoid foods that taste strange to you, but try them again every few weeks as your taste may have improved.
- You may find you link certain foods or drinks with treatment. You may prefer to avoid your favourite foods until you've finished your course of treatment so you don't go off them for good.
- Many people say they can't stand the smell of food preparation or cooking. Grilling rather than frying food may help. Try cooking outside on a BBQ to keep cooking smells out of the house. Cold or room temperature foods may be more appealing.
- Family or friends may offer to cook food which you can freeze in portion sizes to defrost and heat in your microwave.
- Try using plastic utensils and glass cookware to lessen a metallic taste.
- Good mouth care is always important when you are having cancer treatment—follow the advice of your cancer doctor and nurses and see the information sheet "Coping with sore mouth, dry mouth and mouth infections" at [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz)
- For more ideas, talk to your cancer nurse or dietitian. The Cancer Society booklets *Eating Well/Kia Pai te Kai and Got Water?/He Wai?* also have useful information. You can view these on our website: [www.cancernz.org.nz](http://www.cancernz.org.nz)