



WHAT YOUR NOSE KNOWS

Sense of Smell and Your Health

Your sense of smell enriches your experience of the world around you. Different scents can change your mood, transport you back to a distant memory, and may even help you bond with loved ones. Your ability to smell also plays a key role in your health. If your ability to smell declines, it can affect your diet and nutrition, physical well-being, and everyday safety.

“It’s estimated that the number of odors that people can detect is somewhere between 10,000 and 100 billion, or even more,” says

Dr. Gary Beauchamp, a taste and smell researcher at Monell Chemical Senses Center in Philadelphia. We all have different combinations of odor-detecting cells in our noses, he explains, so people vary greatly in their sensitivity to smells. “In fact, when you or I smell the same physical thing, our perceptions may be very different,” Beauchamp says.

SMELL & OUR HEALTH

Because smell information is sent to different parts of the brain, odors can influence many aspects

of our lives, such as memory, mood, and emotion. For thousands of years, fragrant plants have been used in healing practices across many cultures, including ancient China, India, and Egypt. Aromatherapy, for example, aims to use essential oils from flowers, herbs, or trees to improve physical and emotional well-being.

Smell is also important for your perception of taste. Chewing your food releases aromas that travel from your mouth and throat to the nose. Without smell, we can detect only 5 basic tastes:

sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and umami (savory). But our brains incorporate information from both taste and smell receptors to create the perception of many different flavors.

Some people may think they've lost their sense of taste if food begins to taste bland or slightly "off." But in fact, they may have lost their ability to smell.

Many things can cause smell loss. A stuffy nose, or a harmless growth in the nose (called a polyp) can block air and thus odors from reaching the sensory cells. Certain medications, like some antibiotics or blood pressure pills, can alter smell. These effects are usually temporary. Your smell should come back once you've recovered or stopped the treatments.

But some things can cause a long-lasting loss of smell. A head injury or virus, for example, can sometimes damage the nerves related to smell. And your ability to smell may naturally fade as you get older.

People who've lost their sense of smell sometimes try to boost flavor by adding more salt or sugar to their foods. But these additions might cause problems for those at risk for certain medical conditions,

such as high blood pressure, kidney disease, or diabetes. Talk with your doctor if you think a smell deficit might be affecting your quality of life.

If your food doesn't smell or taste the way you think it should, talk to your doctor. Health care providers can give you a "scratch and sniff" smell identification test to help assess the kind of smell disorder you might have. This test alone can't diagnose more serious health problems, but it can be informative when used alongside other tests.

Like all of your senses, your sense of smell plays an important part in your life. If you think you're experiencing a loss of taste or smell, see your health care provider. There may be ways to help fix the problem. If not, your doctor can help you learn to cope with the changes in smell and taste.



LOSS OF SMELL & SAFETY

If you've lost your ability to smell, it's important to find other ways to detect:

- **Smoke.** Check your smoke detectors once a year to make sure they work.
- **Gas leaks.** Make sure you have a gas detector in your home.
- **Spoiled food.** Throw out food that's been in the refrigerator too long and practice other basic food safety. Learn more at www.foodsafety.gov.
- **Household chemicals.** Make sure there's fresh air where you live and work.

