

Loss of taste, or **dysgeusia**, is one of the less common after-effects of a stroke. Often it occurs with a loss of smell as well, and can be quite distressing. This factsheet explains how taste loss can happen after stroke and offers some practical suggestions for coping with it.

Unfortunately there has been **little research** done into **taste loss** after stroke (also known as **dysgeusia**). Perhaps this is because taste is a relatively **simple** process, and because taste information does **not appear** to be **vital** to human survival. A loss of taste, however, can make a **big difference** to the **quality of life**, and people do find it is a **distressing** and **unexpected** after-effect of a stroke.

What happens with taste processing is that the **taste buds** in the **tongue** send **messages** about specific **categories of taste** along **nerve pathways** up to the brain, ending in an area called the **taste zone** in the **sensory** part of the **brain**. It may be that a **stroke** can affect either the **taste zone**, or the **areas of the brain** through which the taste pathways have to go. Either way, there is **no treatment** that can be offered to restore the lost senses after a stroke. **Recovery** from a stroke takes place as the **undamaged** parts of the brain **learn** to take over the **functions** of the damaged parts, but with the more **specific functions** like taste and smell, it is much **harder** for the brain to do this.

## General advice

- It is important to keep your **mouth clean** and **brush teeth** regularly and thoroughly, including brushing your **tongue** as well. A **mouthwash** may help and dental floss will remove any debris caught between the teeth, which can add to bad tastes.
- Try eating food **cold** or at **room temperature**, rather than hot. Sometimes, cooling can reduce strong or sweet flavours.
- Choose foods that **smell appealing**. The way foods smell plays a significant role in how a person recognises food flavour.
- **Drink plenty of liquid** to remove any unpleasant tastes in your mouth. Try fizzy drinks, squashes, fruit juices, tea, coffee or water.
- Chewing **sweets** such as mints or boiled sweets can help to refresh your mouth, as can sherbet or sorbet.

## If food tastes too sweet

- **Dilute** sweet beverages or juice with water/soda/tonic water.

- Choose **sharp-tasting fruits** such as gooseberries, blackcurrants, grapefruit or stewed rhubarb in pies or tarts.
- Use **lemon juice** to mask sweetness.
- **Chilling** sweet foods can make them taste less sweet.

### If food tastes bitter

- **Honey**, syrups, jam/marmalade or sugar may hide bitter tastes. Artificial sweeteners may also help; but some can leave an aftertaste, which may not be helpful. Diabetic patients should first consult their diabetic nurse.
- If **tea or coffee** taste bitter, try alternatives, such as lemon, herb or china tea, cocoa, malted milk drinks, hot chocolate, fruit juices or fizzy drinks.

### Ideas to flavour food

- Add **spices** to puddings, for example, nutmeg to rice pudding or custard, cinnamon or ginger to stewed fruit, melon or grapefruit.
- Add chunks of **dried fruit**, such as apricots or sultanas, crystallised stem ginger or nuts, to fruit dishes and puddings. Sprinkle with desiccated coconut.
- Add **grated chocolate** or coffee granules to milk or ice cream.

- Add **chilli**, spices or curry powder to savoury dishes.
- Try cooking chicken with tarragon; lamb with rosemary or mint; pork with cloves or apple. **Experiment** with using different **herbs**.
- Use **pickles**, mustard, ketchup, vinegar, bottled sauces or salsa. Adding lemon and lime juices or a dash of alcohol (if allowed) to cooking adds flavour.
- **Bacon bits** or **grated cheese** (such as Parmesan) can add a stronger taste.
- **Olives**, pesto or sun dried tomatoes may add flavour to pasta dishes.

It is advisable **not** to use **salt** to enhance flavour in food, as too much salt can raise **blood pressure**, and high blood pressure is a **risk factor** for stroke. Also, those on restricted diets such as **diabetics** should consult a diabetes nurse before making any changes to their diet, such as adding sugar or honey or other substances.

For further information, phone the Stroke Helpline on 0845 3033 100, email [info@stroke.org.uk](mailto:info@stroke.org.uk) or visit our website [www.stroke.org.uk](http://www.stroke.org.uk)