

Taste and Aging: Keep the Flavor in Your Eating Pattern

One often overlooked effect of aging is a decrease in your senses of smell and taste. This can lead to diminished appetite and weight loss, malnutrition, impaired immunity, and worsening health.

Sense of taste and aging:

After age 50, we start to lose some of the over 10,000 taste buds that we're born with. While changes in taste buds contribute to decreased sense of taste, it's actually the decreases in olfactory function, or sense of smell, that play the most important role in taste. It's been reported that 75% of people over age 80 have major olfactory impairment.

How we taste foods:

There are five basic tastes: sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and umami, or savory. Umami is the taste of glutamate, an amino acid found in protein-containing foods including chicken, cheese, nuts, and meat. Glutamate taste is often described as brothy, full-bodied, meaty, and savory. Glutamate is added to foods in the form of MSG, or monosodium glutamate, which breaks down into its component parts, sodium and glutamate.

Chewing food releases molecules into the mouth that flow up the back of the throat to the nose to stimulate smell receptors. The five tastes combine with texture, spiciness, temperature of food, and aroma to produce flavor. It's the total combination of the basic tastes and other senses that allow us to distinguish food flavors.

Possible causes of decreased sense of taste:

Elderly people often have several chronic diseases and routinely take multiple medications, which leads to an increased risk of taste disorders. Many

medications affect taste, smell, or the production of saliva, which can lead to changes in food preferences and eating habits.

Other potential causes of or contributors to loss of taste include poor oral hygiene, radiation treatment to the head or neck, head or facial trauma, smoking, and nutrient deficiencies, including a lack of zinc, copper, B12, or niacin.

Decreased taste can lead to health problems:

Some people eat less because of this loss of taste and subsequent decreased enjoyment of food, which in turn can lead to undesired weight loss and inadequate nutrition. Others try to compensate by adding salt or sugar to food to increase its flavor. Adding more sugar can lead to weight gain or an increased risk of chronic disease or even poor management of diseases such as heart disease and diabetes. Adding more salt can contribute to higher blood pressure levels.

Improve the taste of foods in a healthful way:

Use a variety of fresh or dried herbs, or salt-free herb blends, to flavor foods without adding salt. You can also include flavorful hot peppers in recipes, or sprinkle hot sauce on foods like chicken, fish, or eggs for a burst of flavor. Add some spice or vinegars to marinades too. Or try roasting cut-up vegetables in the oven to bring out a naturally sweet, more intense taste. And as a last flavor boost, squeeze lemon or lime juice on vegetables, fish, and chicken before serving them.