

Taste and smell problems after brain injury



This publication is part of Headway's *Effects of brain injury* series. To browse through our publications on a range of issues relating to brain injury and download these free-of-charge, visit www.headway.org.uk/information-library.

Contents

Introduction	1
How are taste and smell affected by brain injury?	2
Health, safety and hygiene issues	2
Tips to maintain a healthy, balanced diet	4
Psychological effects	7
Other possible causes	7
Compensation claims	8
Acknowledgements	8

Introduction

Following a brain injury, many people report that their senses of taste and/ or smell have been affected. This may be as a consequence of injury to the nasal passages, damage to the nerves in the nose and mouth, or to areas of the brain itself.

Loss or changes to smell and taste are particularly common after severe brain injury or stroke and, if the effects are due to damage to the brain itself, recovery is rare. The effects are also often reported after minor head injuries and recovery in these cases is more common. If recovery does occur, it is usually within a few months of the injury and recovery after more than two years is rare.

Sadly, there are no treatments available for loss of taste and smell, so this publication is designed to provide practical suggestions on how you can compensate.

Helpline: 0808 800 2244
Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Web: www.headway.org.uk

The information in this publication does not replace clinical guidance from medical professionals. You should always seek advice from a GP or other suitably qualified professional for help with managing the effects of brain injury.

How are taste and smell affected by brain injury?

The two senses can both be affected in a number of different ways and some definitions of the terms for the different conditions are provided below:

Disorders of smell

Anosmia - total loss of sense of smell

Hyposmia - partial loss of sense of smell

Hyperosmia - enhanced sensitivity to odours

Dysosmia - distortion in odour perception

Phantosmia/ parosmia - 'false' smells, perceiving smells that aren't there

Disorders of taste

Dysgeusia - distortion or decrease in the sense of taste

Ageusia - total loss of sense of taste

Dysgensia - persistent abnormal taste

Parageusia - perceiving a bad taste in the mouth

The two senses are connected and much of the sensation of taste is due to smell, so if the sense of smell is lost then the ability to detect flavour will be greatly affected. Therefore, a disorder of smell will usually occur together with a disorder of taste.

Health, safety and hygiene issues

Taste and smell provide a vital warning system against many health and safety

Helpline: 0808 800 2244
Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Web: www.headway.org.uk

issues. The following suggestions can help to compensate for losing these abilities:

- **Fire/ smoke** - Fit a smoke alarm, have electrical appliances regularly serviced, remove plugs when not in use and use an alarm to remind you of food cooking in the oven.
- **Gas leaks** - Have gas appliances regularly serviced and fit a gas detector. You might want to consider fitting an electric cooker and fire.
- **Out-of-date food** - Always eat or throw out food by its 'use by' date. If in doubt, throw it out! Clear out the fridge and cupboards regularly.
- **Identifying products** - Try to keep products such as drinks, bleach, cleaning products and solvents in their original containers. Make sure they are clearly labelled.
- **Home hygiene** - Ask family/ friends/ carers to help empty rubbish bins and keep toilets and kitchen appliances clean to avoid health risks.
- **Personal hygiene** - Be aware of the need to wash yourself, your clothes and bed linen regularly. Use an antiperspirant deodorant and perhaps a shoe deodoriser too. Ask a close friend or family member to advise on any problems in this area.
- **Mouth care** - It is important to keep your mouth clean and to brush teeth regularly, including brushing your tongue as well. Using mouthwash and dental floss helps. It is important to pay regular visits to the dentist.
- **Toxic fumes** - Take precautions and follow manufacturers advice when using products such as paint, cleaning products and solvents. Wear a protective mask, ensure rooms are well ventilated and don't smoke.

Changes to taste and smell can affect appetite and eating in a number of ways:

- The smell of food stimulates the appetite, so loss of smell can lead to reduced appetite and lack of interest in food
- Loss of smell can also lead to reduction in saliva production, therefore dry foods, such as biscuits and crackers, may be more difficult to eat

Helpline: 0808 800 2244

Email: helpline@headway.org.uk

Web: www.headway.org.uk

- The choice of foods may be limited to those which provide flavour, which can lead to a diet that doesn't provide a balanced variety of nutrients
- Loss of enjoyment of food can lead to avoiding eating altogether
- Altered taste may make certain foods, such as meat, taste unpleasant and lead to those foods being avoided

Tips to maintain a healthy, balanced diet

Any of the problems listed in the previous section may effect your choice of food and lead to an inadequate diet. It is very important to maintain a healthy, balanced diet and below are some suggestions to help you do this. It is important to note that some of these suggestions may not be suitable if you are experiencing difficulty with chewing, swallowing or choking and have been advised to eat a softer diet. Consult your GP, dietician or speech and language therapist for further advice.

Make meals more interesting

- Be imaginative. Use varied colours and textures.
Under-cook vegetables so that they are crunchy. Have a crunchy base with a smooth topping
- Try using seeds, nuts, wholegrain cereals, fresh fruit and vegetables, beans and pulses to add texture
- Adding bacon bits or grated, strong cheese, such as parmesan, can add flavour to a meal
- Experiment by using different herbs and spices
- Use grated onions, carrots, apples or other suitable fruits and vegetables to add texture
- Serve hot and cold foods together. Try ice cream with hot sauce/ stewed fruit, or lasagne with salad.
- Make meals a social time with friends and family

Helpline: 0808 800 2244
Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Web: www.headway.org.uk



- Establish a regular routine. Try to eat breakfast, lunch, evening meals and snacks at the same time every day.
- Use a cookbook and try new and interesting recipes

Ensuring your diet is varied and nutrition

A good, balanced diet is essential for good health. NHS Choices provides an excellent source of advice on this at www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well. The 'Food Facts' section of the British Dietetic Association website at www.bda.uk.com/food-health/food-facts.html is also full of useful information.

All that is really required is to eat sensibly, choosing a range of foods in the correct proportions. Below are some suggestions to help you do this:

- Try to base your meals on starchy foods such as bread, cereals, potatoes, rice or pasta. Aim to include at least one food from this group in each meal.
- Try to eat as great a variety of foods as you can
- Have at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day
- Try to drink the equivalent of about a pint of milk a day. This includes milk used in tea and coffee. Try to use reduced fat milk and be very careful that milk hasn't gone off, especially in hot weather.
- Limit foods containing a lot of fat and sugar
- If you avoid certain foods because they taste unpleasant, look for alternative sources of protein and nutrients. For example, if you cannot eat meat, replace it with fish, beans, eggs or milk.

If you continue to experience difficulty adjusting your diet or have any other dietary concerns, such as diabetes or Coeliac disease that make it difficult to vary the foods that you eat, discuss this with your GP.

You can ask your GP or other healthcare professional for an NHS referral to a registered dietitian, who can assess, diagnose and treat diet and nutrition problems. Alternatively, you can find details of registered dietitians in private practice on the Association of UK Dietitians' website at www.bda.uk.com/find-a-dietitian.html.

Helpline: 0808 800 2244

Email: helpline@headway.org.uk

Web: www.headway.org.uk

Avoiding using too much salt

Loss of sense of taste may make people likely to add too much salt or other flavourings, such as garlic or chillies. To avoid using too much salt try:

- Following a recipe or routine to avoid over-salting foods during cooking
- Try to add less salt in cooking and not to add salt at the table
- Vegetables that are steamed, baked, roasted or cooked in the microwave retain their natural flavour better than when they are boiled. This reduces the need to add extra salt in cooking.
- To add flavour to foods, try different herbs and spices, mustards, lemon juice, vinegar, pickles and sauces - follow directions for using additional flavourings and try not to add extra, as over-seasoning foods can cause indigestion.

Drinking

Loss of taste and smell can also affect the amount of fluids you can drink, which may result in dehydration. It is also possible to have too much caffeine or sugar in hot drinks to try to make up for an impaired sense of taste.

Government recommendations are to drink 8 glasses of fluid a day. This includes all drinks such as water, juice, tea, coffee, etc, but not alcoholic drinks, as alcohol dehydrates the body. If exercising heavily, you will need to drink more than this.

- Avoid very strong tea and coffee or try decaffeinated varieties
- Avoid adding excess sugar to tea and coffee
- Energy drinks often contain large amounts of caffeine and should only be drunk in moderation

Drinking plenty of liquid can help to remove unpleasant tastes from the mouth

Alcohol

You may have been advised to avoid alcohol because of your brain injury or any medications you are taking. If you are unsure, ask your GP.

- Tolerance to alcohol can be reduced following brain injury. Try to drink in

Helpline: 0808 800 2244
Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Web: www.headway.org.uk

moderation or not at all.

- Remember that alcohol will have the same effect on you even if you cannot taste it
- Make sure that you know what is in drinks that are brought for you
- Try drinking low alcohol or alcohol-free beers as an alternative

For further information on this topic, see our publication [Alcohol after brain injury](#).

Psychological effects

Taste and smell are linked to emotional memories. A particular odour or taste, such as flowers or a favourite food, can bring happy or sad memories flooding back. Losing this capacity, along with the loss of enjoyment of food, can be a major factor in the onset of depression. It is important for carers, family members and healthcare professionals to be aware of the need for understanding and support to help people to come to terms with such effects.

Headway groups and branches can be an excellent source of support and provide the opportunity to talk to people with similar difficulties. You could also speak to your GP about any emotional difficulties and they may be able to refer you to a counsellor or clinical psychologist. Alternatively, you can contact a chartered psychologist working in private practice. You can find a directory of chartered psychologists on the British Psychological Society website at www.bps.org.uk.

Other possible causes

It is worth consulting with a GP to find out whether there could be any medical reasons other than brain injury for changes to taste and smell. This is especially important if the symptoms haven't been noticed until some time after the injury.

Some medication can also affect the sense of smell. It is worth consulting your GP to see whether the symptoms could be a side effect of any medication being taken.

Helpline: 0808 800 2244 Email: helpline@headway.org.uk Web: www.headway.org.uk

Compensation claims

If a compensation claim is being made, make sure that any effects on taste and smell are covered in the claim, as they could significantly increase the amount of money awarded. More information about making a claim is available in the our publication [Claiming compensation after brain injury](#).

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Debbie Sutherland, of Cumbria PCT Acquired Brain Injury Service, for contributing to this publication and to the British Dietetic Association for allowing information from their website and factsheets to be incorporated.

This publication received a Commended award at the British Medical Association Patient Information Awards 2010.

As a charity, we rely on donations from people like you to continue being able to provide free information to those affected by brain injury. To donate, or find out how else you can get involved with supporting our work, visit www.headway.org.uk/get-involved.

If you would like to leave feedback for this publication, please consider completing our short survey at www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/hwpublications or contact us at publications@headway.org.uk.

Last reviewed 2018. Next review 2024.

Helpline: 0808 800 2244
Email: helpline@headway.org.uk
Web: www.headway.org.uk