



# Smell and taste loss after COVID-19

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**This leaflet gives information and advice for people experiencing loss of smell and taste following COVID-19.**

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## What we know

For some people, regaining their sense of smell and taste may take a long time. This is because the COVID virus has damaged the cells supporting the receptors in the nose that capture the odour molecules the brain interprets as smells. These cells are designed to grow back, but this does take time. During that recovery process – which can be as long as 24-months – the person will have a reduced ability to smell and may experience parosmia (distorted unpleasant smells). Many people who lose their sense of smell from a virus have a very good chance of recovering it, particularly if they take up the regular practice of ‘smell training’.

When diagnosis has ruled out other conditions as a cause, there is unfortunately currently no medicine to cure smell loss. Sometimes, a steroid spray may be prescribed, but this is only for short-term use and does not cure smell loss.

## The link between taste and smell

Much of what we experience as taste, or flavour, is actually what we smell. Gustation, or what we call ‘true taste’ is identified by the sensory nerves in the tongue and mouth. These allow us to detect sweet, savoury, bitter, salty and umami qualities in food. And there are two smell pathways in use whenever we eat – through the nose (orthonasal olfaction) – and through the back of the mouth (retronasal olfaction). These different sensory pathways combine to give us the full flavour experience.

Your favourite foods could taste and smell different while you are getting better from COVID. The loss of taste and smell usually only lasts for a short time, but you might not eat as much because you do not feel hungry or you don’t enjoy food as much.

## How can I make food taste better?

Try to choose foods that you enjoy eating to make sure you eat well, but keep trying out different foods as the food you like may change as your taste comes back.

Keep your mouth clean and healthy by:

- Brushing your teeth every morning and evening.
- Rinsing your mouth with water if it feels dry or uncomfortable.
- Avoiding mouthwashes that contain alcohol.

If you find cooking smells affect how hungry you feel, you could try out microwavable meals that need heating up or cold food such as sandwiches or salad.

Find out what you enjoy eating by trying out food with different:

- Flavours.
- Textures.
- Temperatures.

You may find it easier to:

- Eat plain flavours such as: chicken, fish, tofu and rice.
- Eat cold food or food at room temperature.
- Eat food with different textures.

If foods have a metallic taste, try plastic or wooden cutlery instead of metal cutlery and use glass cookware.

Try using sauces and spices to change the flavour of different types of food to find the one you enjoy the most:

Try adding strong flavours to food to make them taste better, such as herbs, sauces and spices. Some flavours with a sharp taste, such as orange, lemon and lime, can make food taste less sweet. Sucking boiled sweets and mints may refresh the taste in your mouth, before and after eating. If food tastes too salty or bitter, try out low-salt options or adding sweetener, honey or sugar.

## Smell retraining

Smell training is actively sniffing the same four scents every day, spending around 20 seconds on each scent and really concentrating on what you're doing.

It's that easy. It's safe, it's recommended by doctors and anyone can do it.

Smell training needs to be followed daily for up to six months, but all the scientific evidence shows that it's a worthwhile investment of time, as those who smell train are significantly more likely to enjoy a better recovery.

Smell training, keeping your nose clear with regular rinsing, and eating a healthy diet are all important things you can do to improve recovery time. You may also be more vulnerable to low mood and depression during this time, so take care of your mental health too.

## Further information

The following website provides guidance on smell retraining and support for those with smell and taste loss.



<https://abscent.org/nosewell>

To find out more about our Trust visit [www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk](http://www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk)

**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

RBFT Pain Management Unit (Long COVID Clinic), June 2026

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