

I find it hard to eat because food tastes or smells different

Introduction

Many aspects of your life can be affected after being critically ill, and this includes how your body feels and how you are eating. It may be that you find eating more difficult than before and you may feel worried or low because of your difficulties.

Often, these problems get better as you get stronger, but you may need some help or advice while this is happening. This information sheet looks at common problems around eating after critical illness and gives you tips about what may help.

This information forms part of advice on 'Nutrition and recovery after critical illness', and is a sub-section of the '[Tips to help with eating problems after Critical illness](#)' leaflet. Also see the '[Nutrition when at home](#)' and '[Nutrition in the hospital](#)' information. Nutrition is the term used to describe what you eat or drink to give you energy and other nutrients to help your body recover and stay healthy.

Having this information may help you to understand more about nutrition, how it can help your recovery and overcome any difficulties with eating after your critical illness. We hope it will help you and your family, but if you have any particular nutritional questions or worries, please ask your doctor for help or see if they can refer you to a dietitian. A dietitian is a registered health care professional who advises about nutrition for health and during illness.

You can check how healthy your current weight is for your height on the NHS website¹. There are also very good self-screening tools to use to check whether you should be worried about how your low weight or poor eating may affect your health from the Patients Association² and BAPEN³.

If you have ongoing difficulties with eating, even after this advice, if you have a low weight or are continuing to lose weight or strength, do speak to your doctor or ask to see a dietitian.

¹ <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-weight/bmi-calculator/>

² <https://www.patients-association.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=3449fca0-dc52-4f06-ac75-3050b71d7bb5>

³ <https://www.malnutritionselfscreening.org/>

I find it hard to eat because food tastes or smells different

It is common to find that taste and smell can be different after your critical illness. This may be because:

- the medicine you had while in the intensive care unit
- your body's response to the stress of critical illness
- you needed help breathing (either oxygen through a mask or being on a breathing machine)
- you were fed by a tube through your nose.

You might find that you have a complete loss of taste or smell or that food tastes like metal, too sweet or has a bitter or salty taste. This means that food or drink may taste different once you start eating again and this can make it difficult to eat what you need. These changes to taste and smell usually get better after a short period of time but the following advice can help you manage it until then.

What can help me eat when I have a loss of taste or smell?

- Eat when you feel hungry and choose the types of food you feel like you want to eat.
- It may help to rinse your mouth well before eating to keep it fresh, especially if you need to use a nebuliser (a device that helps you breathe in a fine spray of liquid medicine to help your lungs and breathing) or have had oxygen through a mask.
- Sharp, strong or tangy flavours may help to make you feel like eating, so use these flavours in your cooking or as sauces.
- Sugar-free mints or chewing gum may help to get rid of any unpleasant tastes in your mouth.
- Brush your teeth, tongue and gums more often if you find that this helps.

What will help me if food or drinks taste metallic?

- It might help to use plastic cutlery to help reduce the metallic taste in your mouth.
- Try choosing acidic or tangy flavoured food and drink as this may cover up the metallic taste.

What will help me if foods or drinks taste unusually sweet?

- It may help to choose salty or acidic flavoured foods to stop the sweet taste.
- Cut down on sweet and sugary foods.
- Water down sweet tasting drinks or fruit juices with water or ice.
- Having herbal tea before meals may help.

What can I do if foods or drinks tastes unusually bitter or salty?

- Adding sweet flavours to food or drink, such as sweetener, honey, or sugar may help reduce the salty or bitter taste.
- Drinking herbal tea e.g. ginger/ mint before meals may help.

Summary

These changes in taste should settle down in time, but if you are worried about them, or these tips haven't helped and you are finding it difficult to eat, ask a doctor or dietitian for advice.

More information:

NHS UK advice on:

- Metallic taste <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/metallic-taste/>
- Lost or changed sense of smell <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/lost-or-changed-sense-smell/>

See ICUsteps information for more information <https://icusteps.org/information>

This information sheet forms part of the wider Tips to help with eating problems after critical illness: <https://www.bda.uk.com/resource/tips-to-help-with-eating-problems-after-critical-illness.html>

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With thanks to the working group authors and reviewers; Louise Albrich, Anouska Baker, Danielle Bear, Mina Bharal, Ruth Chinuck, Emma Gaskin, Carmen Hodgkiss, Tom Hollis, Katie Johnson, Emma Leech, Jennifer Leyland, Judith Merriweather, Lucy Morgan, Gemma Naidoo, Katy Stuart, Ella Terblanche and Liesl Wandrag.

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