

Bad Taste

Hi Pat!

My mom is recently having some difficulty and I was thinking about calling you but then I saw your email about your new site. Very cool! Anyway, Mom can no longer taste anything. She says everything takes like cardboard mush. She's not taking any new meds or stopping any old meds. Her doctor said he has no idea and left it at that. She had this once for a couple of weeks and it cleared up. But this time it's worse and is lasting for months and months. Have you ever heard of such a thing? Could it be stress related? Thanks for your help, Amanda.

Dear Amanda,

I have heard of such a thing. My Mother suffered off and on with something similar. She said everything tasted bad! She was pleased to lose 30 lbs but eating nothing is not a healthy way to do it. She was also frustrated by her doctors' lack of concern. I'll share some of the things we checked into.

You didn't mention whether your Mom is experiencing problems smelling, but smelling is very important to tasting. Test how acute her sense of smell is by asking her to identify a wide variety of things, by smell, while blindfolded. Hide something really pungent in a room and ask her to find it using her sense of smell. Compare her abilities with your own. Place something pungent at a distance and walk together toward it to see how far away you each smell it. Be silly and have a lot of fun together while doing these tests because any excuse to laugh is a good one! If her sense of smell is impaired, she has a different issue to discuss with her doctor. Get back to me and I'll get you information about that.

Most taste problems are caused by injury, disease, dental problems or medication.

A head injury, radiation for head or neck cancer, Bell's palsy or several other conditions could damage the nerve paths from the taste buds to the brain, causing a lack of taste. Surely her doctor knows whether any of these would apply.

Dental problems can cause poor or bad taste responses. She should tell her dentist about the problem and ask him/her to thoroughly examine her mouth for any hidden problems.

Infection of a salivary gland will cause a bad taste. Mostly these resolve themselves in a week or few. If not, she should ask her doctor, specifically, to look for that. Assist the healing process by sucking on sour things like lemon slices or pickles. Sour things cause the glands to secrete more saliva which will help to wash out any blockages or infections. Saliva is needed to digest food properly, and prevent tooth decay and other mouth infections. A dry mouth is not a healthy happy mouth. If hers is dry, that is another problem to address.

The most common cause of taste problems is medication. A recent change of medication isn't always necessary to cause a problem. Sometimes, as in my Mother's case, it's a buildup of the medication in the body. None of her doctors figured this out for her; she figured it out for herself.

She was taking a low dose of Lanoxin, a Digitalis medicine used to improve the strength and efficiency of the heart, or to control the rate and rhythm of the heartbeat. This leads to better blood circulation and reduced swelling of hands and ankles in patients with heart problems. Several times she went to the ER for problems. When the ER docs checked her blood, they found that her Lanoxin level was too high, and took her off it. Shortly, her sense of taste would come back and she'd be happy. After a while, one of her doctors would decide she should be on Lanoxin and put her back on it. After another while, everything would start tasting bad, again.

She figured out the pattern and solved her problem herself, by refusing to take any more Lanoxin. After the fact, one of her doctors admitted that toxic levels of Lanoxin could cause a bad taste. I'm not recommending that anyone should stop taking medication! My Mother can be a bit extreme, but she exercised her right as a patient to make a choice and, luckily, is doing fine without the medication. However, this is something that should be thoroughly discussed with a doctor. When taking any medication, it's important to have blood levels checked frequently to insure that the dosage is correct.

Of course, stress makes everything worse. If there is any possibility, your Mother is suffering from depression or anxiety disorder, discuss it with the doctor.

So, Amanda, you and your Mother should not give up on your quest to find a solution. Taste is important for our mental and physical health and welfare. Lack of it can cause depression and/or physical problems due to poor nutrition.

Continue to educate yourselves and go back to the doctor armed with enough information to get what you want. Start with the sources I used to write this.

Taste: <http://nihseniorhealth.gov/problemswithtaste/toc.html>

Dry mouth: <http://nihseniorhealth.gov/drymouth/toc.html>

Smell: <http://nihseniorhealth.gov/problemswithsmell/toc.html>

Salivary gland infection:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001041.htm>

Good Luck and keep me posted.

Patricia Kenworthy August, 2006