



# Nutrition News

## How Does Aging Affect Your Taste?

On average, adults have about 10,000 tastebuds - not only on the tongue, but the throat and mouth as well. These tastebuds react to distinct tastes (five of them in particular): sweet, sour, bitter, salt, and umami (a savory taste). While tastebuds are a major factor in experiencing flavor, olfaction, or smell, accounts for about 80% of what you are tasting. Your perceptions of certain flavors like mint and cinnamon come from the aromas that pass through the millions of olfactory receptor cells in the nasal cavity.

Unfortunately, with aging, our flavor perception will eventually deteriorate. Certain factors vary from person to person, but inevitably it will happen to everyone. Although it often goes unnoticed, we start to lose our sense of smell at around 50. By age 80, olfaction may have declined by 60% or more, but it rarely diminishes completely. Among the reasons for the gradual loss of nasal nerve cells that detect aroma include hormonal signals, the decline in nerve signals to the brain, and less mucus production in the nose. Mucus helps trap aromas in the nose long enough for taste to be detected. The effects of these changes can be more profound in some individuals compared to others.

Along with the attenuation of our ability to discern smells, the number of tastebuds, our neural response to taste, and the amount of saliva we produce gradually start to diminish. This begins around age 50 for women, and a little later in men. Given otherwise good health, the loss of taste appears to be more modest than the loss of smell.

But age isn't the only reason for losing your sense of taste. Some sinus conditions, colds, head injuries, other health conditions, medications, radiation, chemotherapy, smoking, and chemical particulates in the air can affect and potentially accelerate the loss of taste and smell.

### Go Easy With The Salt Shaker

To compensate for the loss of these senses, your initial reaction may be to boost up the level of spices (such as salt or sugar) in your dish, but this could be problematic, especially if you have pre-existing medical conditions such as diabetes and/or high blood pressure. Luckily, there are alternative solutions to keep the joy in eating flavorful food that don't involve overseasoning it. Let's walk through the ways we can make sure our food is bursting with flavor while maintaining our health:

### Your Spices Don't Age As Well As You Do

**Be mindful of the quality of ingredients** you are using, and how long you cook them for. Overcooking destroys flavor components in your favorite foods.

**Try incorporating foods with bold flavors**, such as sharp-aged cheese, garlic, onion, concentrated fruit sauce, flavored vinegars or oils, and chilis.

**Use fresh or dried herbs with robust aromas**, such as basil, thyme, chives, cilantro, rosemary, and sage. If you're clipping something fresh from your own garden, great - but remember, you'll need more. One tablespoon of fresh herbs is equivalent to one teaspoon of dry herbs. Crumbling dried herbs brings out their aroma even more.

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Dutchess County Office for the Aging • 114 Delafield St., Poughkeepsie NY 12601  
(845) 486-2555 • toll free (866) 486-2555 • [www.dutchessny.gov/aging](http://www.dutchessny.gov/aging)

Todd N. Tancredi  
Director, Office for the Aging

Nimesh Bhargava, MS, RD, CDN  
Nutrition Services Coordinator

Marcus J. Molinaro  
County Executive

## How Does Aging Affect Your Taste? (continued)

**Whole spices such as allspice, cloves, coriander, and cumin can all be toasted** to bring out more of their aromatic, natural oils before grinding them.

**Acidic ingredients can add a nice pop** to your plate. Consider adding a squeeze of citrus (lemon, lime, or orange), a splash of cider or wine, or maybe fruits such as pineapple, pomegranate, or cranberry.

**Try experimenting with salt substitutes;** soy sauce can be used in more than just Asian dishes, you know! In fact, soy sauce has less sodium per teaspoon than salt. Soy sauce adds that extra “oomph” with umami and aroma. You can also use monosodium glutamate instead of salt (unless you’re sensitive to it). MSG has one third the sodium as the same amount of salt.

### **You’re Not Too Old To Learn New Tricks**

Many simple cooking techniques can also aid in bringing out the flavor of your dishes. You can intensify the flavors of fish, poultry, and meat with some high heat cooking, such as searing, grilling, or broiling. With these techniques, amino acids react with sugars (this is known as the Maillard reaction), giving your food deep, rich flavor. It enhances aromatic and other sensory experiences as well.

Reducing meat, poultry, vegetable or fish stock concentrates their flavor. Simmering can brighten flavor notes too. When it comes to chopping up what’s going into your stock, finer is better - it increases the amount of surface area that’s in contact with the water.

Caramelizing onions brings out their natural sweetness, intensifies their aroma, and give them a pleasing golden brown color. If you’ve heard the term “caramelizing” but don’t quite know what it is, just think of the old barbecuer’s term “low and slow.” It might not be the cooking technique to

use if time is of the essence, but it’s the only way to slowly draw out the natural sugars in onions. Higher temperatures cook off the liquid too quickly and can end up burning the onions instead.

### **Take Time To Make It Look Good**

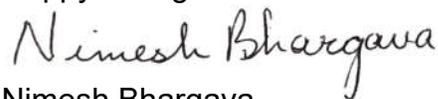
Visual appeal also enhances flavor experiences, so be sure your plate is well-presented, colorful (“eat the rainbow,” as we often say here), and presents a variety of textures and shapes. The saying “you eat with your eye first” is quite true. Visually appealing food will stimulate the salivary glands to produce saliva, which helps in experiencing flavors by breaking down the food to its core flavors.

### **What’s the hurry? Sit. Eat.**

Be sure to thoroughly enjoy your food. Savor the flavor! Chewing food longer releases more flavor molecules. In addition, chewing longer aids significantly in digestion, and ensures smoother bowel movements.

All in all, tasting food is mostly controlled by your sense of smell, but as we grow older, our sense functions tend to decrease in quality. Aside from flavor’s profound impact on food enjoyment, diminishing taste and smell can lead to a loss of diet quality and interest in eating all together. We highly suggest incorporating some of the ingredients mentioned above to make your eating experience the best it can possibly be, without the negative effects of overloading on salt or sugar.

Happy eating!



Nimesh Bhargava  
OFA Nutrition Services Coordinator

#### **Volunteer Drivers Wanted OFA Home Delivered Meals Program**

If you can deliver weekday meals to homebound seniors in Dutchess County, please contact us!

Email [nbhargava@dutchessny.gov](mailto:nbhargava@dutchessny.gov)  
or call (845) 486-2555