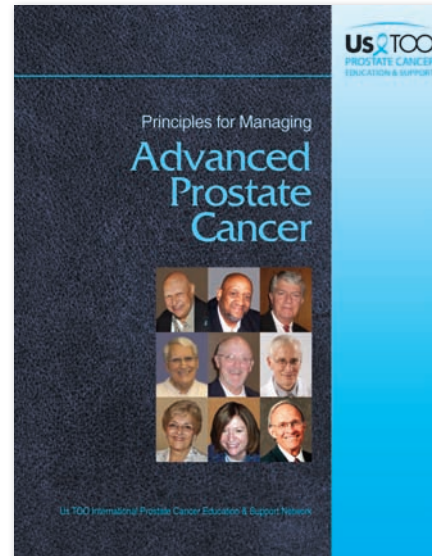


Chemotherapy and Taste Issues

by Frederick S. Gersh, March 2011



*Prostate cancer warrior
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For the cancer patient undergoing chemotherapy, the lack of flavor in the taste of food is a perplexing and frustrating situation. While the chemo medicine is attacking the cancer cells, it also is changing the taste buds—clusters of bulbous nerve endings on the tongue and in the lining of the mouth that provide the means for the sense of taste. (New Oxford American Dictionary Second Edition 2005.) The extent of this condition varies with each individual. However, chemo does have a negative effect on the sense of taste for everyone on the treatment.

Flavor is the quality of something that affects the sense of taste and the blending of taste and smell sensations evoked by a substance dissolved in the mouth. In addition to the four basic tastes of sweet, sour, bitter and salty, Japanese cuisine includes a fifth flavor called “Umami,” popularly referred to as savoriness. Translated it means “pleasant savory taste” and describes a pleasing “brothy” or “meaty” taste with a long-lasting, mouth-watering, coating sensation over the tongue. Its fundamental effect is the ability to balance and round out the total flavor of a dish. Umami clearly enhances the palatability of soups and a wide variety of foods that are not sweet. Fruits, fruit juices and some dairy products do not match well with Umami. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umami)

To be tasty, food needs to have a marked, pleasant and appetizing flavor. Ingredients a person may have typically used to enhance the flavor of food may not be sufficient while undergoing chemotherapy. Several short-term adjustments may work for some individuals since the condition is always changing.

Chemo patients can **empower** themselves by understanding their five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch, and the chemical relationships that result in a pleasant-tasting quality. Using the internet, one learns the formal name for “taste disorders” is “dysgeusia.” (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dysgeusia) The Mayo Clinic article, “Eating during cancer treatment: Tips to make food tastier,” is very useful as an initial summary toward understanding this issue. (www.mayoclinic.com/health/cancer/HQ01135)

Some of the short-term actions a chemo patient may take include using plastic ware to avoid the metallic taste; eating ice cream, sorbet, sherbet; sucking on ice chips or sugar-free flavored lozenges/candies (peppermint, lemon, ginger); chewing fennel and cardamom seeds; using a straw for liquids; drinking smoothies; brushing teeth and tongue before and after meals; and rinsing regularly before and after meals with a teaspoon of baking soda in eight ounces of water.

The long-term actions involve purchasing cookbooks and using the recipes specifically geared toward the cancer patient. We have included the names of four books as sources to begin your **empowerment** journey. These books cover a wide range of recipes that are appropriate for the individual with limited cooking ability as well as the person who is more experienced. Preparing some of the recipes will most likely require the patient and his or her caregiver team to learn some new things.

...continued

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The following four cookbooks may be helpful:

1. **“Eating Well Through Cancer,”**

Copyright 2001, 2006

by Authors: Holly Berkowitz Clegg and
Gerald Miletello, MD.

ISBN 10: 0-9610888-8-5. 271 pages.

The most valuable aspect of this book is the organization of the recipes by cancer-treatment stage and by the side effect, such as nausea, diarrhea, constipation, and low blood counts. In addition to providing recipes that are easy to prepare and delicious, the book covers suggestions for food to eat prior to treatments and the best times of the day to eat throughout treatment. Read consumer reviews at: www.amazon.com/Eating-Well-Through-Cancer-Recommendations/product-reviews/0961088885

2. **“The Cancer Cookbook – Food for Life,”**

Copyright 2004.

Author: Roxanne Koteles-Smith Chef
& Coach

ISBN: 1-4184-8528-5. 113 pages.

The focus of this cookbook is on foods that help cancer patients regain energy and vitality. It masterfully presents beautiful, yet simple, foods with a Japanese influence. The photography is excellent and helps make the recipes easy to follow. Also featured are success stories from people with various medical conditions who were able to improve their health due in large part to their diet. Read consumer reviews at: www.amazon.com/Cancer-Cookbook-Food-Life/dp/1418485284

3. **“One Bite at a Time - Nourishing Recipes for Cancer Survivors and Their Families,”**

Authors: Rebecca Katz with

Mat Edelson, Second Edition 2008

ISBN 978-1-58761-327-2. 160 pages.

This book helps patients convert the limited list of foods they can eat into recipes that they will enjoy eating. In addition, there are simple instructions for using a few basic ingredients to help balance the flavors of foods to compensate for taste buds that have been impaired as a result of the chemo. Plus, there are tips to help caregivers understand the challenges cancer patients have with taste, digestion, and energy. Read consumer reviews at: www.amazon.com/One-Bite-Time-Nourishing-Survivors/dp/1587612194

4. **“The Cancer-Fighting Kitchen – Nourishing, Big-Flavor Recipes for Cancer Treatment and Recovery,”**

Copyright 2009,

Authors: Rebecca Katz with

Mat Edelson

ISBN: 978-1-58761-344-9. 222 pages.

A follow-up to “One Bite at a Time,” this cookbook provides more nutritional science about ingredients that helps keep us healthy and the reasons why. Along with great photography and a variety of recipes, the author spices up the content with humor and personal insight. Read consumer reviews at: www.amazon.com/Cancer-Fighting-Kitchen-Nourishing-Big-Flavor-Treatment/dp/1587613441

Both cookbooks by Katz/Edelson contain a very helpful guide to understanding the chemistry of flavors based on FASS—an acronym which stands for Fat, Acid, Salt, and Sweet. They suggest olive oil as the fat, lemons as the acid, sea salt, and Grade B organic maple syrup for the sweet. Food tastes best when these four flavors are in balance.

For 20 months before finding the Rebecca Katz cookbooks, I experimented with taste combinations using a 12-hole muffin pan. In each compartment I mixed various foods and ingredients like Worcester sauce, TABASCO® Sauce, OLD BAY® Seasoning, soy sauce, mustards, catsup, garlic sauces, lemons, salt, pepper, sugar, etc. I learned that making flavors that are hotter is not always helpful. Following the “FASS” approach would be much easier.

We purposely have not included any recipes because we want to encourage **empowerment**. Eating food that’s healthy and tasty while on chemotherapy improves your quality of life and contributes to maintaining an attitude that’s hopeful and positive. An oncology nurse recently told me that as long as I am experiencing this disagreeable taste situation, the chemotherapy treatment is working.

The information provided here has been compiled from various sources for the purpose of understanding taste disorder issues resulting from chemotherapy. No claims are expressed or implied.