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No taste when I have a cold ^[1]

Dear Alice,

Why is your favorite food very tasteless when you have a cold?

Answer

Dear Reader,

As if a runny nose, coughing, and a sore throat weren't bad enough, you and millions of others coping with a cold can't even savor the flavor of homemade soup. Your inability to taste anything when you have a cold is closely related to all the sniffing that keeps you inside and under the blankets.

While the tongue has thousands of taste buds to measure the four primary tastes — salty, sour, sweet, and bitter — the olfactory receptor cells at the top of the nasal cavity measure the odors that provide you with the sumptuous (or not-so-sumptuous) flavors associated with certain foods. The sense of smell is actually responsible for much of what is typically thought of as the sense of taste. So, if your nasal passage is blocked by mucus that keeps you sniffing and sneezing, your olfactory receptor cells aren't being visited by those odors. This leaves everything tasting pretty much the same.

When you have a cold, your nasal passages become inflamed and produce excess mucus that can make you feel stuffed up. Keeping your nasal passages and sinuses moist can help decrease congestion. Using a humidifier, taking long showers, drinking lots of fluids, or using a saline nasal spray can all help to ease congestion. You can also irrigate your nasal cavity with salt-water or use warm compresses on your face. Over-the-counter medications like decongestants or antihistamines can help, too.

If your symptoms become severe or last more than a week, it's recommended that you speak to your health care provider. Fortunately, colds normally go away within a few days, regardless of treatment.

Try to look on the bright side: if you can't taste, it makes taking those unpleasant cold medicines much more bearable. Here's hoping your ability to taste comes back soon!

Alice!

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