Living with smell disorders: a parent’s guide

Many children with Covid-19 don’t have extreme symptoms but it can affect their sense of smell and taste, and it can take many months to get back to normal.

It's common to have parosmia - distorted disgusting smells - as you recover. Parosmia is not harmful, but it's really unpleasant to live with and will affect what you can eat.

Covid-19 smell loss
With Covid-19 the sense of smell disappears like a switch has been flicked. You taste and smell nothing. Then after a couple of weeks, things start to improve. For nine out of ten people, everything goes back to normal then. For some, recovery can take longer and will bring other challenges. This might be continued anosmia (loss of smell), or sometimes a return of some smell, with parosmia (distorted smells). Throughout the recovery period, changes in smell can happen rapidly, and the ability to smell randomly comes and goes, often feeling like any progress is suddenly undone. In adults, this can last for anywhere between six months up to two years.

About parosmia
Parosmia can come on any time between a few weeks to several months later. Patients smell strange odours - smells like smoke or sewage that they know aren't real. They may notice that the sense of smell deteriorates and start to smell rotten, sweet, burning odours everywhere. Certain foods or specific smells are too disgusting to bear - it's very intense. Parosmia is not harmful in itself and it will get better, but it's horrible to live with.

Scientists are still researching parosmia but many think it's a natural part of the process as the nerve cells grow back, and see it as a sign of recovery. It's helpful to know it won't last forever.
Treatment and recovery

There is no medicine for smell disorders. These are damaged nerves that have to heal naturally and this takes time. However, smell training has been demonstrated to support recovery. Research shows that people who smell train recover more quickly than people who do nothing.

Smell training is mindfully sniffing three or four fragrances for 20 seconds each, twice a day, every day. It doesn't matter what you smell - any fragrance will do and essential oils are a convenient tool to use. The important thing is to sit quietly and concentrate on the smell in hand. The technique strengthens the connections in the brain where those nerves are healing.

You can make a smell training kit, or use a ready-made set like AbScent’s Original Smell Training Kit. Younger people might prefer to do their training with Squish Therapy Dough - a squishy scented dough also available in AbScent’s online shop.

Learn the dos and don'ts of smell training with our short guides and video demos at https://abscent.org/learn-us/smell-training

What's actually going on in the nose?

It’s thought that Covid-19 has injured cells in the olfactory system - the connection between nose and brain where smells are recognised.

This may also affect taste because much of what we think of as flavour is actually smell.

The good news is that these nerve cells are designed to grow back, but that can take many months.
Eating with parosmia

This can be more challenging as the altered smell can cause you to feel physically sick. There are common triggers that include onions, garlic, coffee, roasting or frying meat, and eggs. But it could be anything - even water or bread - that triggers a reaction.

Confusingly, the triggers will change over time. What was tasty last week may cause a violent reaction this week. You are going to need patience and curiosity to keep trying different things. It's important to remember that your child is not being picky or difficult: this is a chemical reaction triggered by molecules beyond their control.

It will pass, but at its worst stages your child may not feel able to stomach any food. At this point, flavourless protein milkshakes (like Huel) or even ice-cream may be the best way to get the energy they need. If your child is losing weight dramatically, seek help from your doctor.

A common pattern

The recovery process seems to go through phases, but there is no timetable and some days it can feel like you're going backwards.

- Smell and taste nothing
- Smell and taste start to return
- Everything tastes disgusting, smells make me sick
- Some things taste fine, some smells still make me sick
- Occasional disgusting whiffs
- Managing normally now

Living with altered smell and taste
Support for you

Living with a health condition is not easy for anyone in the family, and it could be helpful for you as a parent to connect with others going through a similar thing.

The AbScent Network is a free online forum with a special section for parents and carers of children with smell disorders. Whether it's sharing tips or recipes, or just checking what's 'normal' you will find us a supportive group, and you can message the AbScent team with specific questions.

https://abscent-network.mn.co

Our Instagram account posts tips and bitesize facts that could be a good source of information for older children, as well as you. Follow us at @AbScentUK.

Our Facebook group is just for adults, but parents are very welcome to join to learn from thousands of others living with smell disorders.

https://www.facebook.com/groups/AbScentCovid19

For facts and practical advice, go to our website AbScent.org.

Keeping fresh

When you can’t smell yourself, personal hygiene can suffer. For many kids, this isn’t something they worry about, but an older child or teenager might be more aware and anxious. Encourage regular hygiene habits and be honest if they’ve overdone it with perfumed products - their schoolmates might not be so considerate!

Keeping upbeat

Regular exercise and an interest or activity can really help, whatever the age. Your child might want to understand more about their condition and become a ‘sensory detective’. You can help by just listening. As a parent you can’t fix this, but feeling understood and taken seriously is a big boost to confidence, however old you are.