

What to expect when you lose your sense of smell

Covid-19 edition

Smell and taste changes, we have learned, are part of the emerging list of symptoms from Covid-19. I'm going to talk in this article about what we already knew about post-viral smell loss, and also describe what appears to be a slightly different scenario for some patients with Covid-19.

I write here from my perspective as a patient advocate, and my five year's experience speaking with people in the AbScent Facebook group (now in fact two groups--one "classic", the other especially for Covid-19 people), as well as my experience in working with my AbScent advisory board members. I have also taken courses in smell and taste dysfunction at the University of Dresden with Professor Hummel and his colleagues.

Before I begin, I'd like to also say that **if you have sudden, unexplained smell loss** with no other Covid-19 symptoms, you should self-isolate and consider yourself a carrier. Please see this link for a [statement from ENT UK](#) on this subject.

1. **Smell loss after a virus is a common phenomenon.** Upper respiratory illnesses account for around a quarter of smell loss cases (this varies on what study you read), but suffice to say that a virus or a bacterial infection like sinusitis that requires antibiotics can lead to changes in smell and the way you perceive your food.
2. **Lots of people first notice that they can't taste their food.** What does taste have to do with smell? It's complicated. There are three things at work when we experience food. a) olfaction: or smell. b) gustation: that's the "true tastes" of salty, sweet, sour, bitter and umami. It happens inside the mouth. c) chemesthesis: these are the sensations like the burn of chili and the coolness of menthol. It can happen in the mouth, when you eat chili, or it can happen in the nasal passages, when you smell menthol. Together, all these things give us an impression that our brain puts together. Confusingly, we call all of these things "taste". As in "this curry tastes delicious!". It's hard not to be confused. "Taste" has two separate meanings. To avoid confusion, I call salty, sweet, sour, bitter and umami "true tastes".
3. **From what we know about "typical" post viral smell loss**, after studying this in cases before Covid-19, **recovery takes time** and follows a couple of typical patterns. They are:
 1. Recovery can be brief, over a period of weeks, or take longer, **sometimes months or years**

2. **Fluctuation** of your perception of your sense of smell is normal. One day you are ok, the next day you feel you are back to zero. This can be discouraging, but many report it. It's part of the known scenario.
 3. Over and over scientists have found that **people's perception** of their sense of smell -- how they rate it -- **is different from their smell test scores**. So it is possible to feel your sense of smell is poor, but when tested, you score pretty well. Again, we don't know why this is. Smell is very mysterious!
 4. Losing your sense of smell/taste can mean **a great loss of well-being**. I know this too well, and have seen it over and over again. If this is you, take heart, and try to find the strength to see yourself through a longer recovery. AbScent is here to help you.
4. **You've lost your sense of smell after Covid-19. Now what?** The next question that doctors and researchers are asking themselves is this: are Covid-19 smell/taste loss people the same as the "typical" cases we are used to? The answer is yes and no. We see some who look typical and others who don't.
1. **Typical cases:** congestion, mucus, post-nasal drip. With or without fever, wet cough. Smell loss noticed during or after the illness has cleared. Sometimes: phantosmia (smelling phantom smells, or smells that are not present) and parosmia (distortion of smells. Most typical is coffee, onions, deep fried foods smelling very disgusting)
 2. **Covid 19 "new" scenario:** excessively **dry, painful upper airways**. Sensation of pressure but free flow of air. Sometimes smell loss before other symptoms. Sometimes the smell loss is **sudden and dramatic**. With or without fever. Dry cough. Changes not just to smell, but also "true taste": salty, sweet changes, or the inability to perceive one or the other. Changes to chemesthesis: can't feel the burn of chili or smell bleach.
5. **What can I expect during my recovery?** It's impossible to judge during the early phases of your recovery from the illness what will happen to your sense of smell. You will have to be patient and wait. Most people will recover, at least to a certain extent, some of their sense of smell. And with this will go a recovery of your "taste" to whatever extent your smell has recovered. Some people, however, will have persistent loss of smell over a period of years.
- Is this true for Covid-19 cases? Again, we don't know and we won't be able to answer that question until we have good scientific data that follows patients like you over a period of months. Certainly, some Covid-19 cases are recovering astonishingly quickly (days rather than weeks or months), but as for what percentage of the group this is, it's impossible to say now.
6. How can I help myself? Here are a couple of ground rules:
1. **Stay informed.** The picture is changing daily, and even the most up to date doctors can't necessarily keep up with what is going on with smell/taste problems in the

context of Covid-19. You are your own best advocate

2. **Do not put anything into your nose that has not been either made for this purpose or prescribed by a doctor/pharmacist.** There is a lot of misinformation on the web. Hydrogen peroxide, colloidal silver, castor oil, neat lime juice: keep these out of your nose.
3. If a doctor or pharmacist recommends you use **nasal sprays**, go on to YouTube and view one of the trusted sources (Mayo Clinic is good) demonstrating how to use sprays effectively. Many people don't use them properly, and then feel that they don't work. They can be tricky to master. Inform yourself--you are responsible for looking after your nose.
4. If **nasal rinse bottles** have been recommended to you (and they are widely recommended by ENTs), a few points. Hygiene is a number one consideration. Read the instructions on the box for keeping them sterilised. You don't want to introduce new infections by improper handling of the bottle. Don't leave residue standing in the bottle all day, and if you get the kind of bottle with a "dock" that you can stick to a bathroom tile, make sure to let it drip dry. If you have an active infection in your upper airways, do not use the rinse bottle.
5. If you have the uncomfortable "dry upper airways" sensation described by many Covid-19 patients, **gentle steam inhalations** might be worth a try. Please be careful-- not too hot and don't get too close. The extra moisture will sooth the mucous membranes.
6. **Do all the things you've heard about elsewhere:** rest. Eat a good diet. Drink plenty of water. Be sensible.
7. The most important has been kept for last: **smell training**. Every scientific study into this supportive technique has shown it is beneficial, whether you've lost your sense of smell or you are healthy and want to make your sense of smell even keener. To learn more [click here](#).

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