AGING and TASTE
Keeping Food Appealing as Senses Decrease

Most of us have experienced how bland food tastes when we have a cold. Most “taste” really comes from odors; our noses can pick up thousands of unique odors. According to NIH research, it is actually our sense of smell that creates pleasure in eating. Without smell, you would probably not be able to tell the difference between a plum and a watermelon.

The senses of taste and smell interact closely to help you enjoy food. You have approximately 9,000 taste buds, which are primarily responsible for sensing sweet, salty, sour, and bitter tastes. The number of taste buds decreases as we age, beginning at about age 40 to 50 for women and 50 to 60 in men. Each remaining taste bud also begins to lose mass (atrophy). If taste sensation is lost, usually salty and sweet tastes are lost first, with bitter and sour tastes lasting slightly longer.

Taste disorders occur frequently in older adults. Common taste changes include hypogeusia (decreased taste overall), ageusia (absence of taste), and dysgeusia (distorted, especially bitter, taste). Though it is quite common for taste buds to be less sensitive as people age, medications can also change the taste of saliva or interfere with salivation resulting in a dry mouth and decreased taste sensation. Some viruses and illnesses can permanently destroy the senses of smell and taste, and strokes may also affect those senses.

Smoking and other environmental exposures can also have an effect. Regardless of the cause, decreased taste and smell can lessen your interest and enjoyment in eating. Here are some ways to perk your senses:

- Change the way food is prepared, such as using different spices. Adding seasonings and spices such as white pepper, lemon juice, bay leaves, cinnamon, orange, and tarragon can enhance many dishes. Marinating foods also increases flavor.

- Try new foods and flavors. Different flavors and combinations may appeal where traditional favorites do not. Unique spice blends are worth trying. Look for “intense” flavors such as ginger and teriyaki. Many people respond well to tart flavors such as lemonade, oranges, lemon pudding, different types of vinegar, and barbecue sauces. Try new teas, fruit ices, sorbet, and low-fat cheese blends, spreads, and dips. Change the “mouth feel” of foods by including crunchy, juicy and creamy textures.

- Enjoy your meals with friends and family. It makes meals more fun and often seems to help food taste better.

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WHI VIPs Include Friends and Family

WHI participants know how valuable supportive people are, whether it’s a husband who embraces eating plenty of fruit and vegetables, a friend with an encouraging word about your eating habits or sharing in the excitement of a new low-fat food find at group sessions. With this in mind, the nutritionists at the New York Clinical Center put together a special event for their Dietary Change participants in Westchester County, NY, and invited the participants’ spouses, family members, significant others, and friends to attend.

“WHI VIP Day” attracted over 30 people to an afternoon of food, fun and education. “A few of the participants expressed that they were having problems getting support in eating the ‘WHI way’ from their families, specifically their husbands,” explains Group Nutritionist Lee-Ann Klein. “We planned a menu that might appeal to families. [Prior to this,] the participants said their husbands complained that foods they made had no taste or were too dry without fat or traditional ingredients.”

Guests were treated to a lunch featuring edamame soybeans, Italian meatballs (see recipe in this issue), chicken kabobs (skewered chicken, pineapple, zucchini and grape tomatoes marinated in fat-free teriyaki sauce), corn and potato salads, and pigs-in-a-blanket (reduced-fat hot dogs wrapped in ready-made pizza dough). For dessert, everyone enjoyed fat-free fudge brownies and fresh fruit. The WHI participants and their guests thought the food was very tasty and many found that sampling new low-fat foods made them eager to try more.

The meal was followed by a rousing game of “Who Wants To Be a Healthy Millionaire?” with teams answering questions like, “How many ounces in a standard serving of meat?” and “Which is the lowest fat choice: sorbet, sherbet, frozen yogurt or ice cream?” Prizes were awarded for correct answers.

New York’s Co-Investigator and Lead Nutritionist Yasmin Mossavar-Rahmani, RD, PhD, talked with the group about the important role loved ones play. “Support from family and friends plays a big part in enhancing health. As a friend or family member, you can make a world of difference by encouraging your WHI participant to stay with the program through thick and thin,” she noted. “Whenever she is discouraged, just a nudge or word of encouragement, or better yet – volunteering to share a dessert with her – gives your WHI participant a great boost in confidence that she can do it.”

“It was a fun gathering,” says Lee-Ann, “and it was nice to see the husbands, significant others, and friends all together.”
Italian Meatballs

Meatballs freeze well, so make the whole batch and freeze some for later use with pasta or in a sandwich.

3 cloves garlic, diced
6 ounces day-old Italian bread (1/2 loaf), soaked in water until soft
1/2 cup diced onion
3/4 cup chopped fresh parsley
1 medium zucchini, peeled and shredded (1 cup)
1 pound 98% lean ground sirloin
1/2 pound 93% lean ground beef
1 pound 98% lean ground turkey breast
1 tablespoon olive oil
2 egg whites
1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
1/4 teaspoon salt, or to taste
1/8 teaspoon ground pepper, or to taste
nonstick cooking spray

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Spray a baking pan with cooking spray. Squeeze out the water from the bread, leaving it very wet, but not dripping. Thoroughly mix all of the ingredients in a large bowl with your hands. Form each meatball into a 2 ounce size (about the size of a golf ball). Place in baking pan and bake for about 25 minutes; for evenly browned meatballs, turn the meatballs over halfway through the cooking time. If desired, the meatballs may be broiled instead of baked, turning to brown evenly.

After cooking, simmer the meatballs with low-fat tomato sauce to serve with pasta or in a french roll.

Makes about 22 meatballs.

Fat: 3 grams per meatball
Grain Servings: 0.5 per meatball

Recipe from the New York WHI Clinical Center Nutrition Staff
Creamy Pumpkin Soup

This rich, creamy soup is perfect for warming up during the cool fall months.

2 teaspoons butter or margarine
1 cup chopped onion
3/4 teaspoon dried rubbed sage
1/2 teaspoon curry powder
1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
3 (10-1/2 ounces) cans low-salt chicken broth
1 tablespoon tomato paste
1/4 teaspoon salt
3 cups cubed peeled fresh pumpkin (about 1 pound)
1 cup chopped peeled McIntosh or other sweet cooking apple
1/2 cup evaporated skim milk
sage sprigs (optional)

Melt butter or margarine in a Dutch oven over medium heat. Add onion; sauté 3 minutes. Add sage, curry powder, and nutmeg; cook 30 seconds. Stir in flour; cook 30 seconds. Add broth, tomato paste, and salt, stirring well with a whisk. Stir in pumpkin and apple; bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer 25 minutes or until pumpkin is tender, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat; cool slightly. Place mixture in a blender or food processor; process until smooth. Return mixture to Dutch oven; add milk. Cook until thoroughly heated. Garnish with sage sprigs, if desired.

Makes 5 one-cup servings.

Fat: 4 grams per serving

Fruit/Vegetable Servings: 2 per serving

Recipe from Cooking Light, October 1997
Low-Fat Bites

If you don’t enjoy drinking milk, cook with it instead. Use evaporated skim milk (which has twice the calcium of regular skim milk) when preparing packaged pudding, “cream” soup, or instant oatmeal.

Burger King has introduced the BK Veggie burger, featuring a flame-broiled patty made from grains and vegetables (no soy), served on a sesame seed bun with shredded lettuce, sliced tomato, and reduced-fat mayonnaise. With 10 grams of fat, it’s a decent fast-food choice (hold the mayo and it’s only 6 grams). Each BK Veggie counts as 1/2 F/V serving and 2 Grain servings. The burgers sell for about $1.99.

Red and green pepper strips are great for dipping in salsa and are healthy substitutes for tortilla chips. A half-cup of peppers equals 1 F/V serving.

Fruit juices can be a convenient way to help reach your daily F/V goal. Be sure to buy juices labeled “100% fruit juice” and try one of the more nutritious juices: orange, pineapple, prune, and grapefruit. Those juices contain some fiber and are excellent sources of vitamin C, potassium, folate and thiamin. 3/4 cup of juice equals 1 F/V serving. The Pawtucket WHI Clinical Center suggests making your own fruit/iced tea blend: Mix unsweetened iced tea with an equal amount of clear 100% fruit juice (they like Dole Raspberry and Kiwi juice). One cup of this blend equals 1/2 F/V serving.

If you crave salty, crunchy foods, try Kettle Krisps Baked Potato Chips. At only 1.5 grams of fat for a one-ounce serving, the chips have a true potato flavor. They are available in four flavors:

Lightly Salted (plain), Hickory Barbecue, French Onion, and Mustard & Honey. A four-ounce bag costs around $2.50. The chips may be located in your supermarket’s potato chip or health/natural food section.

Pumpkins make fine Halloween decorations, but the winter squash is also a great source of beta-carotene. Pumpkins are often on sale in the fall and they keep well in a cool, dry place. Try pureeing pumpkin to use as a creamy soup base, or cut up cubes and mix into a stew for color (recipe suggestion enclosed).

STAFF ...

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Editor: Colleen Steelquist
Scientific Advisor: Beth Burrows
Design: Express Graphic Design

LETTERS ...

We'd love to hear your feedback on the newsletter and your story ideas. We regret that we cannot answer questions about individual medical conditions. Send a letter to:

WHIse Choices
FHRCR
1100 Fairview Ave N, MP1002
Seattle, WA 98109
or e-mail: csteelqu@whi.org
Aging and Taste (continued)

- Discuss any appetite problems with your health care provider. Talk to a pharmacist about the best time to take your medications in relation to mealtime if you are having problems with medications changing the way food tastes, altering your smell response, or producing dry mouth or nausea. Do not stop taking medications unless directed by your doctor.

- Try using plastic utensils if you have a bitter or metallic taste when eating.

- Brush your tongue more often with your toothbrush. Dental researchers have found that a clean tongue helps improve taste.

For Safety’s Sake:

Decreased sense of taste or smell can also create food and home hazards:

- Older people are at higher risk for becoming seriously ill due to improper handling, cooking, and storage of food. Because of age-related changes in sight, taste, and smell, you may not notice, for example, that a piece of cheese is moldy or that a jar of tomatoes smells and tastes funny. Try marking dates on containers with leftovers and remember, “When in doubt, throw it out.”

- For some people, there is an increased risk of asphyxia because the odor of natural gas (from the stove, furnace, or other appliance) can’t be detected. A visual “gas detector” that changes appearance when natural gas is present may be helpful.