

## **HOW YOUR SENSES CHANGE WITH AGE**

### **HEARING PROBLEMS**

Hearing loss is one of the most common conditions affecting older adults. Roughly one-third of Americans 65 to 74 years of age, and 47 percent of those 75 and older have hearing loss. Hearing loss happens for many reasons.

Ear infection can lead to long-term hearing loss if it is not treated. Hearing loss can also result from taking certain medications. "Ototoxic" Medicines damage the inner ear, sometimes permanently. Some antibiotics are ototoxic. Even aspirin can cause problems, but they are temporary. **Check with your doctor if you notice a problem while taking a medication.**

Heredity also is a cause of hearing loss, but not all inherited forms of hearing loss take place at birth. Some forms can show up later in life. A severe blow to the head also can cause hearing loss.

**One of the most common causes of hearing loss is loud noise.** Loud noise can permanently damage the inner ear. Loud noise also contributes to age-related hearing loss, and tinnitus, which is a ringing, buzzing, or roaring sound in the ears.



Noise-induced hearing loss is 100 percent preventable. You can protect your hearing by paying attention to loud noises, which can damage your ears. These include gas lawnmowers, snowblowers, motorcycles, firecrackers, and loud music.

Lower the volume on portable stereos and televisions. When you are involved in a loud activity, wear earplugs or other hearing protective devices. Be sure to protect children as well.

## **PROBLEMS WITH TASTE**

Taste is one of our most robust senses. Although there is some decline in taste, as people get older, normal aging does not greatly affect our sense of taste. Sensitivity to taste begins to gradually decrease as people get older, but in some people, not at all.

Taste contributes greatly to our ability to enjoy food and beverages. **Problems with taste can have a big impact on the lives of older people.** When taste is impaired we tend to eat poorly, socialize less, and generally feel worse.

Taste helps us recognize when food is good or bad for us. But, even more important, loss of taste can cause a loss of appetite in older people, which can lead to loss of weight, malnutrition, weakened immunity, and even death

We can identify five different taste sensations: sweet, sour, bitter, salty, and umami. A Japanese scientist discovered Umami or “savory” in the early part of the twentieth century. Umami is the taste of glutamate, a building block of protein found in chicken broth, meat extracts, and some cheeses.

Gum disease can cause problems with taste, as can inflammation or infections in the mouth and dentures. If you take several medications, your mouth may produce less saliva. This causes dry mouth, which can make swallowing and digestion difficult and increase dental problems.

The most distressing taste disorders are those in which there is a persistent, often chronic bad taste in the mouth, such as a bitter or salty taste. This is called a **dysgeusia** and it occurs in older people, usually because of medications, dental and oral health problems. The medicines that most frequently cause dysgeusias are drugs to lower cholesterol, antibiotics, blood pressure pills, medications to lower anxiety, and antidepressants.

Some people have **hypogeusia**, or the reduced ability to taste. This disorder is usually temporary. True taste disorders are rare. Most changes in the perception of food flavor result from the loss of smell.

Other people can't detect taste at all, which is called **ageusia**. This type of taste disorder can be caused by head trauma, surgical procedures, radiation therapy, and infections.

If you think you have a taste disorder, try to identify and record the circumstances surrounding it. Ask yourself the following questions:

- When did I first become aware of it?
- What changes in my taste do I notice?
- Do all foods and drinks taste the same?
- Have there been any changes in my sense of smell?
- Does the change in taste affect my ability to eat normally?

## **PROBLEMS WITH SMELL**

Problems with smell are common in older people. Thirty percent of older Americans between the ages of 70 and 80 have a problem with their sense of smell.

The sense of smell does gradually decline in older people. Many older people are not even aware that they have a problem with their sense of smell. They may not even notice that they are experiencing a loss of smell until it becomes very troubling.



If you take medications, ask your doctor if they can affect your sense of smell. If so, ask if you could substitute other medications or reduce the dose. Your doctor will work with you to get the medicine you need while trying to reduce unwanted side effects.