

HEARING AFFECTS TASTE?? YES!

Dear Dr. McCrummen: A friend of mine recently damaged his ear and says it affected his taste. Is it true that hearing can affect taste? What else affects taste? S.D.

There are 5 main senses: *sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing*. An additional sense should be considered, *thought*, since our brain affects many things we perceive, in a psychological way. Our six senses can all affect taste, *hearing* in an unusual way. Our senses all can interact to create a perception or expectation, which in-turn can affect each other.

We all experience the sight of some things affecting our taste. If one has an aversion to snails, or oysters, or something looks bad, such as a bruised tomato, apple, or banana, they will most likely not like the taste. Think how much *seeing* that you have gone one day past the expiration date on yogurt, bread, or milk can affect taste.

Smell definitely affects how we taste. If something smells bad, or we have nasal congestion, food can taste bad or different. With the aging process comes a less acute smelling ability. Many medications and nose-sprays affect smell and taste, also. Both age and medications that come with age can make eating unpleasant, or create an indifference to food. Smelling the food enhances our taste perception.

If something feels slimy or goopy, such as Okra or oysters, no matter how it is cooked or presented, it may not taste very good. How it feels, the texture in our mouth, can affect our sensation of taste, or our expectation.

Definitely how we feel about certain foods can affect taste, so adding the 6th sense of thought or imagination can affect the taste of food. If one dislikes dill pickles, psychologically they are prepared to not like any in the future. If we think of lemons, tart cherries, or a tasty food, we can start salivating from the memory of it. It is likely you are salivating from the thought of those words right now.

Hearing can affect taste in a couple of ways. If Pavlov (Russia, ~1904) is a name you have not heard of, he was a scientist that did many well-known digestion and saliva studies. Every time he rang a bell he fed some dogs. After a while, when he rang a bell he noticed the dogs salivated before being fed. It was a "conditioned response". When we see, smell, or hear food preparation, we salivate and anticipate a good taste. If one was to hear a toaster pop-up, an oven door open, corn popping, or a steak sizzling, it can cause salivation, as can the anticipation of being called to dinner. Saliva adds to taste by spreading the flavor around to all the taste buds.

The other way hearing can affect taste is if the ear drum is injured, such as with your friend. There is an important "taste nerve" that goes across the ear drum. If it is damaged, it stops the taste buds from transmitting a message to the brain from the front 2/3rds of that side of the tongue. The nerve is very small and is called the "chorda tympani".

A disease of the salivary glands, or damage to them by something such as intense radiation treatment for cancer, or smoking, can cause a dry mouth, called xerostomia. The lack of saliva also adversely affects taste. Foods, such as coffee, onions, and garlic, as well as tobacco products (tobacco affects taste and smell), and oral disease, such as, abscess, gum disease, and cavities, can affect taste, as well.

If you visit your dental office regularly, they will help to catch and treat disease early, eliminate smelly and bad tasting bacteria colonies, and can diagnose salivary gland dysfunction, helping you to enjoy the food you like the rest of your life with good oral health.