Ask an expert: What could block my ability to taste or smell? A NetWellness column
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Question: I have not been able to taste or smell for about two months. Periodically, I will be able to smell and taste but for only very short periods never lasting more than two hours. I have never had allergies, but maybe I do now. I don’t seem congested. I am going crazy because I love to cook and eat. It is very depressing, and I am now losing weight (currently 5 foot 3 inches and 110 pounds). Can you give me some insight?

Answer: There are nerve endings located along the roof of the inside of the nose that combine with odor molecules as they enter the nose, and these nerves then send signals to the brain thereby allowing us to smell. Therefore, for us to be able to smell, odor molecules must be able to pass up to the roof of the nose.

There are a number of conditions that might cause us to lose our smell, but most affect the nerve endings or nerve pathway to the brain. However, any condition that will increase congestion or swelling in the nose might prevent odors from reaching these nerve endings, and can also cause a loss of smell.

Allergies or chronic sinus inflammation and infection are examples. These conditions might obstruct the roof of the nose, yet the congestion may not be severe enough to obstruct breathing.
If indeed your smell fluctuates, then this suggests the problem is more likely to be an obstruction in the nose, not a condition involving the nerve. As such, there may be effective treatment available. I suggest you consult an ear, nose and throat physician.

It is a little more unusual to lose one's taste. The flavor of food very much depends on our ability to smell, as chewing releases odors from the food that stimulates our smell and imparts a great deal of sensory information, whereas our taste buds only respond to salt, sour, sweet, and bitter. Thus when someone loses their smell, they notice a "taste" loss that is really a loss of flavor perception.

Without our ability to smell, food has a tendency to "taste flat", that is the nuance that allows us to distinguish chocolate from vanilla, orange from lemon, etc. is lost. These flavor distinctions are lost, since our taste buds would only pick up sweet and sour respectively.

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