



# SMELL DISORDERS: Nothing to Sniff At

**U**nlike the loss of sight or hearing, you've probably never given much thought to losing your sense of smell, or olfaction. But it can happen. In fact, more than 200,000 people visit a physician each year for help with smell disorders or related problems.

"During human evolution, the ability to smell was fundamental for survival, enabling us to identify food sources, locate potential mates and avoid danger," says Charles P. Kimmelman, M.D., Department of Otolaryngology/Head and Neck Surgery at Manhattan Eye, Ear and Throat Hospital (MEETH) and Lenox Hill Hospital, and a specialist in smell and taste disorders. "Although not as closely tied to survival today, loss of the sense of smell can have profound consequences."

## Spotlight On

Manhattan Eye, Ear & Throat Hospital

### Smell is of the essence

Located high inside the nose, the olfactory nerve cells send signals to the brain when stimulated by odors and fragrance. Olfaction is essential to our well-being—recognizing the smell of food or perfumes, or associating a particular odor with a childhood memory are basic pleasures we take for granted. Taste is also greatly determined by smell. "The taste buds can only detect sweet, sour, salty and bitter sensations; the full symphony of flavors comes from the nose," says Dr. Kimmelman.

When the sense of smell is compromised, the result can be debilitating. According to Dr. Kimmelman, problems with smell can lead to depression among adults, who tend to eat more to satisfy their unmet olfactory needs, substituting texture for flavor. Research has found that because these patients cannot taste food, their brains do not receive the normal hunger-suppressing signals to keep them from overeating. And because the sense of smell can serve as a warning signal—alerting us to dangers from smoke, a natural gas leak or even spoiled food—problems with smell put us in peril.

### Common causes of smell disorders

Smell disorders vary in degree and manifestation, and include hyposmia, when the ability to detect odor is reduced; anosmia, a total loss of smell; and distortion in the way smell is perceived, such as when a normally pleasant odor smells foul.

Upper respiratory infections, head injuries, polyps in the nasal cavities, sinus infections, hormonal disturbances, aging and exposure to certain chemicals or medications can all trigger loss of smell, although in one quarter of cases there is no obvious cause. Though rare, some people are born with anosmia.

In addition, abnormalities in smell frequently signal underlying diseases or conditions such as tumors, diabetes or nutritional deficiencies. They can also be associated with degenerative diseases of the nervous system such as Parkinson's disease and Alzheimer's disease.

### Recovering the sense of smell

"Olfactory disorders can be diagnosed, and often treated," notes Dr. Kimmelman. The Smell Identification Test (SIT), which Dr. Kimmelman was involved in developing, can determine the extent and nature of a person's disorder by measuring his accuracy in identifying different smells. If necessary, a CT scan or an MRI, as well as other medical tests, may be recommended to provide additional information.

According to Dr. Kimmelman, doctors can use surgical and medical therapies to treat smell disorders depending on their origin. For removing nasal obstructions, surgical techniques are very successful. In addition, certain medications to relieve swelling inside the nose have improved smell. Some patients may even experience gradual recovery because olfactory neurons can replace themselves following loss or injury.

Adds Dr. Kimmelman, "Patients should see a doctor right away if they experience a loss of smell. The earlier treatment is administered, the better the chance that the sense of smell may be restored."

To see a physician for olfactory disorders, call 212-605-3788.

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