

# Tastes like cardboard? Could be your MS



**A recent study shows that a quarter of people with MS experience a diminished sense of taste.**

by Aviva Patz

If you've noticed that cake isn't as sweet, pickles aren't as sour and french fries aren't as salty as you remember, it might not be your imagination. A study from the University of Pennsylvania Medical Center's Smell and Taste Center (STC) recently suggested that 1 in 4 people with multiple sclerosis may experience a diminished sense of taste. "It's definitely related to brain lesion activity," says lead study author Richard L. Doty, PhD, director of the STC, referring to the areas of disease activity seen on MRI scans.

In the study, published in the **Journal of Neurology** (January 2016), Dr. Doty's team administered taste tests to 73 people with MS and 73 without MS. Participants received small drops of liquids—sweet, sour, bitter and salty—on their tongues and tried to identify the tastes. "We found deficits in all regions of the tongue," Dr. Doty says. "About one-quarter of people with MS have a demonstrable detriment in identifying tastes." Among participants with MS, the findings showed that about 15 percent exhibited a loss in bitter taste, 22 percent a loss in sour taste, 25 percent a loss in sweet taste, and 32 percent a loss in salty taste, compared with the controls.

Participants also underwent MRI brain scans. According to Dr. Doty, "With [loss of] taste, we found that it involves lesion volume—the size of lesions in the temporal and frontal lobes," rather than the number of lesions, as observed with other senses, such as smell.

Women with MS showed less taste loss than men with MS, though the study authors don't

know exactly why. “That’s the big question,” Dr. Doty says. “It’s not just true with MS but, in general, taste and smell are longer-lasting in women.”

A diminished sense of taste can lead to poorer appetite or less enjoyment of food. If you suspect your taste buds are faltering, work with your healthcare team to make sure you’re getting adequate nutrition, and learn ways to heighten the flavor of your food.

Fortunately, although people with MS can’t control whether or not their sense of taste will be affected, there are ways to help preserve it. You can practice tasting sweet (sugar), sour (lemon), bitter (coffee) and salty (table salt) flavors. Dr. Doty says you can also strengthen your sense of smell, which is linked to taste, simply by sniffing around. “Keeping the sense active can help the system,” he says, “because the brain is still somewhat plastic.” (For more on neuroplasticity, stay tuned for the upcoming Fall issue.) He recommends repeatedly practicing smelling odors—like 12 different non-irritating food extracts and spices from your pantry—at night, before going to bed, and in the morning. “It’s probably not going to restore the senses completely back to normal, but it can help,” he says.

**Aviva Patz is a freelance writer in Montclair, New Jersey.**

Care to comment? Email us at [editor@nmss.org](mailto:editor@nmss.org).