

We may earn commission from links on this page, but we only recommend products we back. [Why trust us?](#)

## 5 Things Your Sense Of Smell Says About Your Health

By [Judy Koutsky](#) Jan 21, 2016



A whiff of a nice scent can instantly bring you comfort and happiness—imagine your mom's lasagna or your favorite cinnamon candle—while unpleasant ones (like the smell of gasoline or spoiled food) quickly warn you of danger. But what if your sniffer isn't quite up to snuff?

A change in your [sense of smell](#) doesn't simply mean missing out; it might actually signal a health problem. There are several ways this sense might go awry: Some people smell something that isn't present (phantosmia), and others realize that a scent they used to enjoy is [no longer appealing](#) (parosmia). But it's most common to find that your sense of smell has diminished (hyposmia) or to lose it completely (anosmia).



---

Any of these issues—assuming they're not fleeting, like when you have a cold—are worth mentioning to your doctor. "Problems with smell are associated with many disorders and often show up very early in the disease progression," says Donald A. Wilson, PhD, deputy director of the Emotional Brain Institute at the Nathan Kline Institute for Psychiatric Research and a professor at [New York University School of Medicine](#). Here are a few you should know about.

**MORE:** [16 Signs Your Thyroid Is Out Of Whack](#)

**Alzheimer's**



DENIS RAEV/GETTY IMAGES

Using peanut butter, [researchers at the University of Florida](#) compared study participants' sense of smell in their left vs. right nostrils and found that those who couldn't smell so well on the left were more likely to have early-stage [Alzheimer's](#).

Ileana Showalter, MD, an ear, nose and throat specialist at [Mercy Medical Center](#) in Baltimore, was not surprised by those findings. "Decreased sense of smell is one of the earliest signs of Alzheimer's disease," she says. She explains that this degenerative brain disease may start to impact your sense of smell even before you'd meet the diagnostic criteria for Alzheimer's.

---

**MORE:** [7 Weird Reasons You're Gaining Weight](#)

### **Parkinson's**

In order to smell properly, your nose and brain must work together. High up in your nose are olfactory sensory neurons, and whenever you get a whiff of something, these neurons send a message to your brain, where the scent is identified. So if you can no longer smell [bacon frying](#) in the morning or car exhaust from your neighbor's clunker, it might mean that something's going on in your brain. Parkinson's (like Alzheimer's) is a degenerative brain disorder, so it's not surprising that it often goes hand-in-hand with a smell disorder, says Showalter.

### **Hypertension**

Many things can contribute to high blood pressure, and you've probably heard that [eating too much salt](#) is one of them. While anyone can overdo it on the salt, you're more likely to use a heavy hand with the shaker if your sense of smell is diminished, says Alan R. Hirsch, MD, a neurologist and psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of smell and taste loss at the [Smell & Taste Research and Treatment Foundation](#) in Chicago. "People don't realize that 90% of taste is smell," he says, "so when they say they can't taste something, it's really their sense of smell that's off."

**MORE:** [13 Power Foods That Lower Blood Pressure Naturally](#)

### **Obesity and Diabetes**



BALLYSCANLON/GETTY IMAGES

If you can't smell and taste your food very well, there's a good chance you'll end up eating too much of it because you'll have a harder time feeling satiated, says Hirsch. Overeating, of course, makes you prone to obesity—which is the single biggest [risk factor](#) for type 2 diabetes. (Snack AND lose weight with this box of [Prevention-approved treats from Bestowed](#).)

### **When should you be concerned?**

While all of this may sound very alarming, you needn't panic if your sense of smell is slightly less sharp than it used to be: Everyone's sense of smell diminishes a little with age, so don't assume that you're headed for Alzheimer's or obesity. That said, you don't want to ignore an issue that could have been caught early.

If your sense of smell has changed significantly, give it 3 months, suggests Hirsch. If you're still having problems, talk to your doctor, who might refer you to a specialist. Showalter says you may need a nasal endoscopy, CT scan, or [MRI](#). But your physician might be able to figure out what's going on simply by taking a thorough history and doing a physical exam. You might also be given an in-office test, such as the University of Pennsylvania Smell Identification Test (UPSIT), in which you're asked to sniff many odorants and identify each one on a multiple-choice list (there's only one correct answer).

---

### **Want our best eye creams for wrinkles?**

Sign up for our newsletter for this and more science-backed health info.

|                          |             |
|--------------------------|-------------|
| Enter your email address | SIGN ME UP. |
|--------------------------|-------------|

By signing up, I agree to Hearst Magazines' [Terms of Use](#) (including the [dispute resolution procedures](#)); my information will be used as described in the [Privacy Notice](#).

---

## MORE FROM DIABETES

---

**How I Reversed My Prediabetes Naturally**

**10 Unexpected Side Effects Of Diabetes**

**Why Am I Always Super Tired?**

**10 Reasons You're Constantly Thirsty**

**10 Low-Sugar Fruits for Weight Loss**

**Type 2 Diabetes**

**This Diet Helped One Woman Control Her Diabetes**

**11 Foods Everyone With Diabetes Should Buy**

**15 Foods You Should Avoid If You Have Diabetes**

**6 Weird Things That Might Cause Diabetes**

DIABETES

BLOOD PRESSURE

WEIRD HEALTH SYMPTOMS

HEALTH

7 THINGS YOUR SENSE OF SMELL (OR LACK THEREOF) SAYS ABOUT YOU

5 THINGS YOUR LIPS SAY ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

4 THINGS YOUR KNEES SAY ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO LOSE YOUR SENSE OF SMELL?

WHAT YOUR HANDSHAKE SAYS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

6 THINGS YOUR MUCUS SAYS ABOUT YOUR HEALTH

Prevention



**About Prevention.com**

**Press Room**

**Community Guidelines**

**Media Kit**

**Other Hearst Subscriptions**

**Newsletter**

**Give A Gift**

**Subscribe**

**Advertise Online**

**Customer Service**

A Part of Hearst Digital Media

Prevention participates in various affiliate marketing programs, which means we may get paid commissions on editorially chosen products purchased through our links to retailer sites.

©2021 Hearst Magazine Media, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

[Privacy Notice/Notice at Collection](#)

[Your California Privacy Rights](#)

[Interest-Based Ads](#)

[Terms of Use](#)

[Site Map](#)

**Do Not Sell My Personal Information**