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Sixty seconds on . . . parosmia

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I've heard of anosmia but what's this?

The charity Fifth Sense explains that parosmia is the medical term for distortions of the sense of smell. Someone with parosmia may be able to detect odours, but the smell of certain things—or sometimes everything—is different, and often unpleasant.¹

Such as?

Jennifer Spicer, a US based infectious diseases doctor, said that following her recovery from covid-19, coffee, wine, and other foods tasted like gasoline.² Nicola Watt, who also recovered from the virus, described similar symptoms to the *Times*.³ “Quite suddenly everything smelt and tasted like a horrid rubbish bin,” Watt said.

Sounds awful. Is this from covid-19?

Not specifically. Parosmia is common with all types of post-viral smell loss, and over half of people who have lost their sense of smell because of a virus will go on to experience it.⁴ Fragrance writer Louise Woollam, for example, suffered from parosmia after a cold and found that most foods tasted of sewage or mud and most things smelt disgusting.⁵

How awful!

Yes, and what's worse Woollam, like many other people, experienced phantosmia as well when “phantom” smells appear in the absence of any odour. These can manifest as “normal” smells – for example, being able to smell garlic when there is no garlic present – but they can also be unpleasant.¹

Is there a cure?

Unfortunately not. However, Fifth Sense says that both conditions often decrease with time. The charity AbScent recommends patience. “The good news is that parosmia is considered a sign that smell function is returning,” AbScent says. “It can take a long time to recover and pass through this phase.”⁶

What can I do?

AbScent recommends a range of measures to help abate the symptoms, including eating food that's room temperature or cool, avoiding triggering foods such as fried foods and eggs, and trying to stick to bland foods.

How boring

Unfortunately. Other advice includes moving your head in different positions when you experience symptoms, smell training, and stimulating the nose with deep breaths in.⁷

Not sure I'd want to do that when everything smells vile

I don't blame you.

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- 3 Allen-Mills T. Covid sufferers regain sense of taste and smell—and catch a whiff of burnt wood. *Times* 2020. www.thetimes.co.uk/article/covid-sufferers-regain-sense-of-taste-and-smell-and-catch-a-whiff-of-burnt-wood-j0dljx9g7.
- 4 Reden J, Maroldt H, Fritz A, Zahnert T, Hummel T. A study on the prognostic significance of qualitative olfactory dysfunction. *Eur Arch Otorhinolaryngol* 2007;264:139-44. doi: 10.1007/s00405-006-0157-0 pmid: 17006637
- 5 Woollam L. Experience: everything smells like sewage to me. *Guardian*. 27 February 2015. www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/feb/27/experience-everything-smells-sewage-louise-woollam.
- 6 Abscent. NoseWell: an information guide. <https://abscent.org/nosewell/parosmia>.
- 7 Fifth Sense. Parosmia and phantosmia advice sheet. www.fifthsense.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Parosmia-and-phantosmia-advice-sheet.pdf.