

Loss of smell and COVID-19

What you need to know

What is it?

Loss of smell (anosmia) is a known symptom of COVID-19. In fact, approximately 60% of people who contract the virus will lose their sense of smell. It is estimated that 9 in 10 people regain their sense of smell within four weeks of becoming infected. However, in the remaining 10% of cases, this symptom persists.

Besides losing their sense of smell, some people will experience phenomena such as parosmia, a disorder in which odours become distorted from their “natural” smells. For example, coffee may smell like bleach, or a certain fruit might taste like another one. Others will experience what is known as phantosmia, or “phantom” odours—smells that aren’t really present in the person’s environment, for example, the smell of smoke, fire, cigarettes, or gas. A smell disorder can also cause changes in the ability to taste food.

For the people experiencing them, these symptoms are often very unpleasant and can have a major impact on their quality of life or even compromise their safety, for example, if they were unable to smell smoke from a fire. They may also develop certain health issues, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, if they tend to add more salt or sugar to their food because they can’t smell. Finally, this symptom can lead to a loss of satisfaction related to certain pleasant smells, such as a good meal, perfume, the smell of their partner or their children. As a result, their interpersonal relationships may suffer.

Self-management strategies

1) Smell training

Research to date has shown that smell training is the main way to help people regain their sense of smell after it has been lost following a viral infection. It’s recommended to start smell training as soon as possible.

Method:

- A. Assemble five jars with lids (e.g., Mason jars, bottles) containing objects with different but fairly strong smells, such as coffee beans, cinnamon sticks, cloves, or water containing drops of essential oils.
- B. Gently breathe in the smell contained in the jars, twice a day, for about one minute each (alternating between nostrils and then with both nostrils at the same time). Take the time to name what you are smelling (e.g., “This is cinnamon” while breathing in the cinnamon). Try to be as focused as possible during this exercise. You can also change the smells after a while.
- C. Repeat the exercise for at least three months. From time to time, make sure the items in your jars still smell. You can ask someone for help with this. Don’t be discouraged if you don’t notice a difference immediately; it’s completely normal. Your sense of smell should improve over time.
- D. Feel free to take notes to track your progress. Every 2-3 weeks, write down, on a scale of 0 to 5, how much your sense of smell has recovered (0 = I don’t smell anything, 5 = I smell it as strong as ever, or 0 = I don’t recognize the smell, 5 = the smell is exactly as I remember it).



! Caution:
Do not use alcohol-based products, irritants, solvents, etc.

2) Food-related strategies:

- Always check the best-before date on food and don't eat anything that has expired;
- Keep food refrigerated;
- Ask someone to smell the food for you;
- If in doubt, don't eat it.

3) Safety strategies:

- Make sure your smoke detector works;
- Double-check cooking appliances (BBQ, oven, burners, etc.) to make sure they are turned off;
- When using cleaning products, make sure you have good ventilation to avoid a build-up of fumes that you may not be able to smell.



WHEN SHOULD I SEE A DOCTOR?

- If your loss of smell lasts longer than four weeks, it would be a good idea to see your doctor. A prolonged loss of smell may be a sign of another health condition requiring medical attention.
- If you lose your appetite and start losing weight.
- If you experience symptoms such as sadness, irritability, difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping, anxiety, etc.

References:

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- Fleury, E. (May 15, 2021). COVID longue : le sort des patients entre les mains des chercheurs. Le Soleil. lesoleil.com/actualite/covid-19/covid-longue-le-sort-des-patients-entre-les-mains-des-chercheurs--e22ead2def00ebbd368f3e4bfaf7f70
- AbScent. (July 9, 2019). Smell Training. A therapeutic technique for people with smell loss.
- Fifth Sense. (2020). Health and safety tips for people with olfactory disorders fifthsense.org.uk/safety-advice/

Most persistent symptoms improve over time. Be patient and kind to yourself. Most importantly, if you're worried about your symptoms or need more support and advice, don't hesitate to talk to a health professional.

If you have questions about long COVID, please email us at: readaptation.covid.cisssmo16@ssss.gouv.qc.ca.

Our mission

To maintain, improve, and restore the health and well-being of the Québec population by making accessible an array of integrated and quality health and social services, while contributing to the social and economic development of Québec.

Our vision

Accessible and efficient health care and services that adapt to the needs of Québécois.

Our goals

The CISSS de la Montérégie-Ouest achieves its goals through its innovative approaches and stands apart through:

- its exemplary offer of care and integrated services based on interdisciplinarity, accessibility, and adaptability to the needs of its population;
- its willingness to question and improve its professional, clinical, and administrative practices;
- its appreciation of its personnel and the implementation of human resource management practices;
- its strong relationships with its partners.

Our values

Our actions are guided by five equal and interconnected values: compassion, collaboration, commitment, confidence and consistency.