

Lost your sense of smell?

Ear, nose and throat specialist Dr Eng Soh Ping Elliot from Ascent ENT at Mt Alvernia Hospital explains the causes of anosmia and how it can be treated



What are some causes of anosmia?

Anosmia is a partial or total loss of the sense of smell. It is usually not obvious what the condition is caused by, so evaluation involves excluding known causes to rule out any sinister pathology.

The following factors may lead to anosmia:

- The common cold or severe allergy of the nose. Chronic sinus-nasal conditions such as chronic sinusitis or nasal polyps, where there is projecting tissue growth
- Mechanical obstruction of the nasal passage due to conditions such as polyps, tumours or swollen nasal tissues
- Nose surgery, which could affect the nose lining
- A head injury
- Ageing or age-related diseases such as dementia. It is more common for people in their 60s to 70s to have a reduced sense of smell – the olfactory nerve declines with age
- Exposure to toxic fumes, chemicals or smoking
- Medications that may have side effects that include anosmia

How does anosmia affect taste?

How is it related to Covid-19?

As 70 to 80 per cent of flavour in the food we consume comes from olfactory input, any loss of smell may lead to loss of taste.

Covid-19 is one possible cause of anosmia – just like any other upper respiratory viruses that affect the nasal passage. Anosmia is not the diagnostic feature of Covid-19, but a possible presenting symptom of the virus.

In light of the current pandemic,

any patient with anosmia should be evaluated for Covid-19.

How is this condition diagnosed?

The doctor will routinely conduct evaluation tests to exclude any underlying causes. These include a nasal endoscopy to rule out any obvious nose obstruction or localised diseases.

If the endoscopy examination results are normal, a patient may have to undergo medical imaging of the sinuses and brain to exclude any diseases there.

Is anosmia reversible?

That depends on its cause. Nose allergies can be treated medically with antihistamines and steroid nasal sprays. The treatment of nose polyps or sinusitis could potentially reverse the problem.

Removing an offending drug or chemical may also reverse the problem if those are the suspected causes. The condition may also be reversed after the patient recovers from a head injury, or nose-sinus surgery.

However, the prognosis is poorer due to age, the lack of obvious causes, or in cases where there is permanent damage to the nose or olfactory nerves.

What are the treatment options?

Firstly, avoid offending drugs, chemicals and exposure to toxic fumes. Sinus-nose conditions can be medically treated with steroids, antihistamines or a nasal rinse. Antibiotics may be prescribed for chronic sinus infections.

Surgery to remove the polyp or widen the nasal passage is recommended if there is an obvious mechanical obstruction to nasal passage airflow.

Above: Physical obstructions in the nasal passage, sinus-nasal conditions, exposure to harmful fumes or age may lead to a partial or total loss of one's sense of smell. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



DR ENG SOH PING ELLIOT

Ascent ENT Alvernia Holdings Pte. Ltd.
Mount Alvernia Hospital
820 Thomson Road
Medical Centre D
#08-63
Singapore 574623