

Study shows no change in sense of taste after tonsil removal

In a small study of patients undergoing tonsillectomy, or removal of the tonsils, none reported an ongoing dysfunction in their sense of taste following the procedure, according to a report in the July issue of Archives of Otolaryngology–Head & Neck Surgery, one of the JAMA/Archives journals.

Together with the sense of smell and nerve impulses in the mouth, “the sense of taste contributes considerably to flavor perception during eating and drinking and thus plays a major role in the enjoyment of foods and beverages,” according to background information in the article. The sense of taste shows little deterioration during aging but can be weakened by disease or medications. Accidental nerve damage during some medical procedures, including radiation treatment, middle ear surgery, dental or oral surgery or tonsillectomy, also can cause taste dysfunction.

Christian A. Mueller, M.D., of the University of Vienna, Austria, and colleagues asked 65 tonsillectomy patients (42 females, 23 males; average age 28) to rate their own sense of smell and taste before surgery on a scale of zero to 100, where zero is no sense of taste or smell and 100 is an excellent sense of taste and smell. Taste function and sensitivity also was assessed one day before surgery with gustatory testing, during which taste strips for four concentrations of sweet, sour, salty and bitter were applied to both sides of the front and back areas of the tongue. Between 64 and 173 days after surgery, patients were asked to report any changes to their sense of taste or smell and again asked to rate them from zero to 100. Gustatory testing was performed again on 32 patients.

On average, patients’ ratings of their sense of taste and smell decreased following surgery—the average score was 62.3 before surgery and 51.1 after surgery. However, there were no significant changes in gustatory test scores following surgery. In addition, none of the patients reported ongoing dysfunction in their sense of taste or smell at the follow-up questioning.

“This raises the question of whether taste ratings also depend on attentional factors,” the authors write. “Thus, it may be hypothesized that the patients’ ratings of taste function were influenced by the presence of postoperative pain, oral discomfort or wound healing during the first days and weeks after tonsillectomy.”

“A number of case reports and a few systematic investigations of patients experiencing taste disorders after tonsillectomy have been published,” they conclude. “However, based on the present results, taste loss after tonsillectomy seems to be a rare complication.”

Source: JAMA and Archives Journals

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