

PAROSMIA AND PHANTOSMIA



ADVICE SHEET

What is parosmia?

Parosmia is the medical term for experiencing distortions of smell when presented with normal daily smells. It most commonly occurs when a loss of smell has occurred following a viral infection such as the common cold. Sufferers may experience the phenomenon some time after the original insult and typically the sensations are unpleasant e.g. coffee smells like burnt toast.

What is phantosmia?

Phantosmia is the sensation of an odour being present when it is not. This can also be known as an olfactory hallucination. You may feel convinced that the smell is coming from your immediate surroundings but other people near you will confirm that the particular smell is not present. This most commonly occurs after smell loss due to head injury. It is usually unpleasant (termed cacosmia) although it can occasionally be pleasant (euosmia). Occasionally a perceived bad smell that is not detected by others may actually be caused by the presence of an infection in the nose or sinuses and this should always be excluded.

What can be done about this problem?

As mentioned above, these symptoms are usually found together with smell loss (anosmia/hyposmia) and the cause for this should be identified. Treating this cause may in itself lead to an improvement in this symptom. If however parosmia or phantosmia becomes more disabling than the loss of smell or is the only symptom, you should be given specific treatment for this such as nose drops or tablets. With the passage of time, many cases of parosmia and phantosmia will become less troublesome and disappear. However there are some measures which you can try yourself.

Manoeuvres to help ease parosmia and phantosmia

- Valsalva (closing one's mouth, pinching one's nose shut while pressing out as if blowing up a balloon)
- Head movements - try your head in different positions when symptoms occur
- Stimulating the nose with other smells - such as with smell training (see separate leaflet)
- Stimulating the nose with water - try some nasal douching (see separate leaflet)
- Stimulating the nose with deep breaths in through the nose
- Stimulating the nose with trigeminal nerve stimulants e.g menthol, horseradish, mustard, capsaicin (pepper) spray