

Advice for patients with new onset anosmia during COVID-19 pandemic March 23nd 2020

Loss of sense of smell, or anosmia, has a significant impact on quality of life. Typically it affects not only our ability to smell (both good and bad odours) but impairs our ability to detect flavours. Our sense of taste is actually pretty basic – not much more than sweet, sour, salty, bitter or ‘meaty’ (called umami) and this will often be unaffected, although some people report this can also be altered.

For anyone who newly develops this symptom, there is, in addition, often associated anxiety regarding the likelihood of recovery, worry about the underlying cause and sometimes lack of support and understanding from family and friends. We will try to provide some advice for anyone developing anosmia during the COVID-19 pandemic, when access to health-care may be restricted.

Loss of sense of smell can occur following a head injury, in association with conditions that cause nasal obstruction or sometimes as a side effect of new medication. In the absence of these, most remaining cases are often thought to be post-viral.

Post-Viral anosmia is one of the leading causes of loss of sense of smell in adults accounting for up to 40% cases of anosmia. Viruses that give rise to the common cold are well known to cause post-infectious loss, and over 200 different viruses known to cause upper respiratory tract infections. Previously described coronaviruses are thought to account for 10-15% cases. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that the novel COVID-19 virus would also cause anosmia in infected patients. There is growing evidence that significant numbers of patients with proven COVID-19 infection have developed anosmia/hyposmia. For example, in Germany it is reported that more than 2 in 3 confirmed cases have anosmia.

ENT surgeons across the globe have shared reports that they have seen a peak in patients reporting anosmia in the last month, We believe this is related to COVID-19 infection. At present , many affected patients do not have other symptoms, or only mild disease and therefore do not meet the criteria for testing. While may be caused by other viruses, we think that it is reasonable to assume that COVID-19 is the cause until tests prove negative. We therefore advise that patients follow current guidelines for self-isolating if they develop new onset anosmia. This will also apply to co-habiting friends or family.

Please do not visit your GP for loss of sense of smell unless you have respiratory or other problems that need medical attention.

With regards to treating the anosmia, the good news is that colleagues in Italy report encouraging rates of recovery, with many patients reporting return of sense of smell within 7 – 14 days. This seems to be the experience of patients in the UK.

In the past, doctors have often prescribed oral steroids to try to improve recovery rates. There is uncertainty regarding whether oral steroid can make the severity of COVID19 worse and therefore at the moment we are advising against the use of oral steroids, particularly during the first 2 weeks after the onset of symptoms.

Nasal steroids are unlikely to be of benefit – although as they have low rates of absorption into the body, if you take them for hayfever or other conditions, please continue to do so, as reducing sneezing and a runny nose will help reduce risk of transmitting the virus.

So – what can you do except wait? Well, smell training can be very useful – particularly as you will be at home self isolating. This involves repeated stimulation of the smell nerves. There are some excellent resources available to help you do this;

www.fifthsense.org.uk

abscent.org

If you cannot go out to buy the essential oils make use of strong odours that you find round the house!

In addition, there is some weak evidence to support the use of alpha-lipoic acid and omega3 supplements, and using Vitamin A drops in the nose. None of these have been trialled in COVID-19 infection and so advice may change and be updated. They are currently available to order on amazon, but don't worry if they sell out – to repeat again, there is a good chance of recovery without these.

On the positive side, if you have had COVID-19 and are making a good recovery, you will hopefully have developed some immunity which should give you some peace of mind at what is a very difficult time. However, please continue to take all recommended precautions with regards to regular hand washing and social distancing once your period of self-isolation is over, particularly if you have not been tested.

We will update this advice if more information becomes available