



Olfactory (Smell) Training Therapy

Background

There are many causes of loss of smell, the most common being viral infections, sinus disease, and age-related changes. Olfactory training (OT) is a relatively new treatment for disorders of smell and there have now been several meta-analyses showing OT is safe, cost-effective and can help you recover your sense of smell.

OT involves sniffing four potent scents twice a day for several months to retrain the brain and smell receptors in your nose, in much the same way that exercise trains your muscles, heart and lungs. Just like physical exercise, it takes a sustained effort and it is not a quick fix. OT works on the basis of neuroplasticity, which is the brain's ability to compensate for a change in sensory input.

Is olfactory retraining appropriate for me?

It is important the underlying cause of your loss of smell is first diagnosed by a doctor. Although OT can be very helpful, it may be more effective to treat the underlying cause.

How to use olfactory retraining

Purchase four different fragrances (eg lemon, rose, eucalyptus and clove) essential oils from a chemist or supermarket. Some people prefer to use other strong odours, such as cooking herbs, cinnamon, chocolate, coffee etc. The actual scents used are not critical, as long as they have a strong odour you use four different ones.

Open a bottle and take repetitive short sniffs, rather than one long sniff, for 20 seconds. Repeat this for all four fragrances twice a day.

Results may be improved if you 'visualise' the smell as you sniff it. For instance, picture in your mind a eucalyptus tree as you smell eucalyptus oil. This helps neural pathways to regenerate between the smell receptors in the nose and the smell centres in the brain.

As your sense of smell recovers, you may notice previously pleasant smells become awful, known as parosmia. This is a sign that your sense of smell is recovering and you should persist with OT.

How long will it take for my smell to recover?

In general, the longer you use OT, the greater your improvements will be. The minimum duration you should use OT is 3 months. There is no maximum time to use it for, and many patients continue to use it for years.



What are my chances of recovering my sense of smell?

The sooner you start OT the better the results. Conversely, the longer it has been since you lost your sense of smell, the less likely you are to have a significant improvement in your symptoms. The prognosis of smell recovery also depends on the cause of your loss of smell. In general, approximately two thirds of patients experience improvement. OT has been shown to help about 30% of patients with loss of smell.

Are there any medications or operations that will help?

If there is an underlying condition causing your loss of smell, such as sinusitis, there may be surgery or medication that is helpful. However, for most causes of loss of smell there are no effective medications or supplements.

Practical Tips

- If the fragrance bottle has a very small opening, it may be better to tip a drop onto paper tissue to smell
- If you cannot smell the scents do not give up, OT can still work
- There are several useful videos on YouTube, search for 'AbScent NoseWell Smell Training'.

Interesting articles

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- www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2021/03/covid-19-smell-recovery-its-own-strange-experience/618357/
- www.bbc.com/news/health-56865129