

# Using Your Senses for Better Health

Touch, sight, smell, taste and sound. These five senses provide much pleasure in life. Many believe that simply enjoying life can help one live a healthier life. Using your senses to help you enjoy life can:

- Improve your mood
- Help you relax
- Lower your blood pressure
- Reduce stress, anxiety and depression
- Decrease pain
- Help you focus on the present

Read more below about each of the senses, and how you can use the pleasure of your senses for better health.

## Touch

The skin is the largest organ in the human body. It is full of nerve receptors that let you feel the smallest change in texture or temperature. Touch helps you eat, get dressed and drive a car. It is also a form of communication – touching, hugging or cuddling can express what words often cannot.

Research has shown the importance of touch. In one study, premature infants who were given a 15 minute massage, three times a day for ten days, gained 50 percent more weight than the other premature infants. They were also discharged from the hospital six days earlier. Another study showed that office workers who received brief relaxation massages were more alert and made fewer mistakes.

Try some of the following to satisfy your desire for touch:

- Get or give a massage
- Practice self-massage
- Pet an animal
- Try and new art or craft, such as pottery making, and enjoy the feel and use of your hands
- Walk barefoot on soft grass or in wet sand
- Treat yourself to a long, hot bath



## Resources

The Place...*of wellness* offers classes, free of charge, for patients and caregivers on touch therapy, healing touch, and self-massage. Full body and brief relaxation massages are also available. For more information, contact the Place...*of wellness* at (713) 794-4700 or visit [www.mdanderson.org/wellness](http://www.mdanderson.org/wellness).

## Sight

Sight allows you to enjoy the natural beauty of the earth – the colorful flowers in bloom, a mountain on the horizon, a dove nested in a tree. This natural beauty, no matter how big or how small, can get your attention outside of yourself and your worries. It reconnects you with the larger world around you.

Looking at natural beauty has been shown to help people recover from surgery, manage pain, lower blood pressure and relax. Simply viewing slides of nature scenes led to more positive feelings.

Bring some of the following things into your home or office to help you reconnect with nature:

- Plants, such as a bonsai tree or herb garden
- A fish aquarium
- Photographs or paintings of outdoor scenes
- A vase of flowers
- A basket of pine cones, leaves or feathers



## Resources

MDA-TV, M.D. Anderson's cable television system, has two relaxation channels – channels 80 and 81. Both of these channels provide nature images and music to help reduce stress and anxiety. For more information or help with MDA-TV, look for the Patient Education Guide or call (713) 792-7287.

## Smell

The sense of smell influences our life greatly. A scent can bring back romantic memories or warn us of spoiled food. Most of our reactions to scents are based on our previous experiences, so different people may respond differently to the same smell. For example, the smell of fresh cut grass may remind some of fun childhood summers, while others may be reminded of allergies and runny noses.



Since smells can have different effects on different people, you can test various scents to find out their effect on your mood and body. Smell a variety of perfumes, colognes, spices and foods. Once you know how scents affect your mood, you can use them at a particular time to help you create your desired mood.

Aromatherapy, the use of fragrances to enhance healing and wellbeing, has been used for many years.

Various scents have been shown to:

- Improve concentration
- Have a calming effect
- Increase energy level
- Reduce stress

## Resources

The Place...*of wellness* offers an aromatherapy class, free of charge, for patients and caregivers. For more information, contact the Place...*of wellness* at (713) 794-4700 or visit [www.mdanderson.org/wellness](http://www.mdanderson.org/wellness).

## Taste

We eat to nourish our bodies. We also eat to celebrate and socialize. Eating is a pleasure for most people, but our enjoyment of food is often taken away. When we are in a hurry, we gulp down our meal, without taking the time to taste it. Or we find ourselves constantly on a diet, eating tasteless, “weight-loss” foods.



It is possible, though, to eat healthy and enjoy the food. In fact, enjoying your meal can be good for your health. Several studies have shown that people absorb more iron when they eat food that tastes good and they enjoy.

A diet full of flavor also helps. Garlic and chili peppers, two very flavorful foods, are a healthy addition to your diet. Capsaicin, an ingredient in chili peppers, is thought to lower cholesterol, help prevent heart attacks, and prevent certain cancers. Garlic has been shown to lower cholesterol and blood pressure, and boost the immune system.

Try the following tips to eat healthy and savor your food:

- Thoroughly chew your food. This breaks down the food and releases more taste.
- Eat slowly. This lets you enjoy the food and gives your body time to realize it is full.
- Try new foods. Don't get stuck in a routine of eating the same meals day after day.
- Eat what you are hungry for. Don't start automatically eating until you know what you want.

## Resources

The Place...*of wellness* offers several programs, such as Guest Chef and nutrition classes, to help you eat healthy, flavorful foods. For more information, contact the Place...*of wellness* at (713) 794-4700 or visit [www.mdanderson.org/wellness](http://www.mdanderson.org/wellness).

The Department of Clinical Nutrition is also available to provide nutritional information and counseling. Ask your doctor to make an appointment with a dietitian for you.

## Sound

Sound is with us everywhere. Even in our mother's womb, our ears were active. The sounds we hear in everyday life can often be bothersome or overwhelming – car horns, jackhammers, and screaming children. But sound can also be energizing or relaxing.



Music has the ability to alter your moods and emotions. High-pitched, fast music typically makes you feel happy and playful. Slow, quiet music helps to calm and relax. Whatever mood you are looking for, there is music to help you reach that desired mood. Experiment, and find out what kind of music you really like.

Music has been used in many settings to help people live happy, healthy lives. Patients who listen to music before, during or after surgery have less pain and anxiety, and recover faster. Patients also report less discomfort during medical exams if they can listen to music of their choice. A study in a nursing home showed that playing music at bedtime reduced the number of sleeping pills residents needed by two-thirds.

There are many ways you can incorporate music into your life. Try some of the following to find out what works best for you:

**Listen to sounds of nature.** Audio tapes of ocean waves, soft rain or bird songs can have a soothing effect.

**Learn to play a musical instrument.** This increases your pleasure and appreciation for music. Try private lessons, classes or how-to books to see what the best learning situation is for you.

**Take up singing.** This natural breathing exercise helps to relax and energize. You can sing in a group, such as a choir, take singing lessons, or just sing along with the radio.

**Exercise to music.** Music helps to regulate your breathing and makes you feel less tired.

### Music Therapy

Music therapy uses musical activities, such as singing, playing an instrument and listening to music to improve health and wellbeing. Music therapy has been used to:

- Manage stress
- Decrease pain
- Express feelings
- Improve communication
- Promote physical rehabilitation

The Place...of wellness offers music therapy at no cost, with a board certified music therapist. For more information, contact the Place...of wellness at (713) 794-4700 or visit [www.mdanderson.org/wellness](http://www.mdanderson.org/wellness).

