Purpose/Objectives: To describe the prevalence of issues with taste function in survivors of head and neck cancer.

Design: Exploratory, cross-sectional.

Setting: Outpatients from Saint Louis University Cancer Center in Missouri.

Sample: 92 adult head and neck cancer survivors, heterogeneous in cancer site, treatment type, and time post-treatment, ranging from three months to more than 28 years after completion of therapy.

Methods: Taste discrimination was assessed using high, medium, and low concentrations of sweet, salty, sour, and bitter tasting solutions.

Main Research Variables: Taste, percentage of weight change, tumor site and stage, treatment type, and time since completion of therapy.

Findings: Eighty-five of 92 participants had some measurable taste dysfunction. Confusion between bitter and sour and the inability to discriminate among the different concentrations of the sweet solutions were common. Statistically significant weight loss was associated with dysgeusia.

Conclusions: Taste dysfunction was a persistent problem across all categories of head and neck cancer treatments, sites, and stages. Participants who reported the loss of one or more specific taste modality performed poorly on the taste test. However, participants could not accurately predict which taste was most severely impaired.

Implications for Nursing: Taste dysfunction is a long-term treatment-related side effect for head and neck cancer survivors. Assessing for taste changes and dysgeusia are important nursing considerations, as taste loss is distressing and associated with decreased appetite. Future studies are needed to identify interventions to help patients better manage and adapt to this long-term complication of cancer therapy.

Knowledge Translation: Flavors are recognized by taste, texture, aroma, thermal quality, and visual cues. A disruption of one or more of those sensory experiences alters flavor recognition. Having intact taste sense but impaired flavor recognition is possible. Finally, taste is not accurately self-reported because it is commonly confused with flavor recognition.