

PAMELA PAUL

And Just Like That, I Could Smell Exactly Nothing

June 5, 2022



By [Pamela Paul](#)

Opinion Columnist

Like any other vaxxed and boosted human, I didn't look forward to getting Covid — not when it was life-threatening Alpha, not when it was Delta-variant dreadful, not when it was Omicron omnipresent. I had enough brain fog already, thank you very much, and wasn't kindly disposed toward the uncertainties of long Covid. But I was confident that when I did succumb, as perhaps we all must, there was one thing I didn't need to worry about: anosmia. Though I might wind up coughing, feverish and as clogged as a frat house toilet, I just knew I'd be spared my sense of smell. My nose was too darned sensitive and persnickety to capitulate.

I may as well have placed a custom order. Just as when I once said, "As long as it's not a C-section" and "As long as it's not bedbugs," the fates knew precisely what to do.

The loss of [smell and taste](#) remains one of the most confounding aspects of Covid. One pre-Omicron study found that loss of smell affected 38 percent of participants and loss of taste, around 30 percent. For some, it's a minor inconvenience amid more dire consequences, but for others — especially people who rely on their noses professionally or whose other senses are compromised — it can be a profound shift in perceiving the world. We don't

know for sure why it happens or who is susceptible, nor do we understand completely [why the rates dipped](#) with the latest variant. Omicron anosmia also supposedly lasts for less time: approximately two or three days, down from a much longer average for previous variants.

But as with all things Covid, to paraphrase one doctor, you've seen one case of Covid, you've seen one case of Covid — nothing is assured, and my nose chose to go its own way. Throughout the pandemic, the loss of smell has served as a bellwether, leading many to sniff their way to the coffee maker on waking for the first sign of infection. In my case, it wasn't until Day 8, right as I was feeling fully recovered from my springtime rendezvous with Omicron, that my nose called it quits — just like that. One morning, holed up in my isolation chamber, I plunged my face into a bag of Dunkin' Donuts Original Blend and smelled exactly nothing.

Normally, I'd know right away if I'd accidentally picked up a bag of Midnight Dark Roast. Smell and taste are two things I've always been good at. I can smell from someone's sweat if the person has eaten red meat or worked out in synthetic material. I can walk into a room and smell when a TV has been on. I am fully convinced that I can smell static. When I reveal this, most people look at me as if I were a lunatic, but a rare few will nod in recognition. One of us. My grandfather was a chemist and a professional nose, and I've always liked to think that while he held on tight to his chemistry skills, he did pass down his acute sense of smell.

My other senses are nothing to shout about. Always nearsighted, I have reached an age when I can see neither close up nor far away, neither with glasses nor without — and contact lenses are near intolerable. I'm the first to turn up the volume on the remote, and yet a certain level of ambient noise is enough to make me leave the party. The specter of my late father, a man for whom the phrase "hard of hearing" was less a polite euphemism than an outright lie, looms like a portent.

Last year Tejal Rao, a Times food critic, [memorably detailed](#) her anosmia during Covid's earlier days. For her, a professional eater and expert chef, the

loss was profound. My newfound inability to distinguish between varieties of Haribo gummies is a far cry from Rao's suffering and from that of the thousands of others who have endured marked and often persistent cases of anosmia. One friend's teenage daughter came down with Covid in March 2020, and her sense of smell still hasn't fully returned; imagine wondering as you head off to college if the rest of your life will be forever marked. Others I know just become resigned to smelling the world in a lesser way. After months of long Covid, people stop even asking if you're back to normal. And what is normal these days, anyway?

Some in my family see an upside to my ongoing status as a nonsmelling person. I'm not going to be the one to grab the last cherry Danish or insist on serving Hetty McKinnon noodles three nights in a row. "Feel free to clean up the cat vomit in the hallway," my husband said cheerfully the other day shortly after I awoke.

I feel like a bizarro version of Oliver Sacks's famous colorblind painter, a man whose sudden loss of color — achromatopsia — meant "he found foods disgusting due to their grayish, dead appearance and had to close his eyes to eat" according to Sacks. Food, to me, isn't disgusting so much as it is joyless. Cooking has lost all interest, and so I've let it go. In lieu of family dinner, I now regularly declare it a "grab and go" night, letting the kids consume processed food from the freezer while I deposit spoonfuls of cereal into my mouth hole, a task about as gratifying as filling up a tank at the gas station. A Memorial Day weekend visit to the New York Botanical Garden, with its heady bouquet, remained a strictly visual experience. I get all the seasonal pollen sneezes without the compensation of fragrant blooms.

How long will my olfactory dysfunction last? The answer is, as with all things Covid, nobody knows. Like many others wading through the uncertainty of Covid, I could survive anosmia only to acquire dysosmia — in one version of this condition, you smell things but smell them wrong: A ripe peach may smell like diesel runoff. Ice cream may seem rancid. A barbecue, like a house burning down. Summertime, here we come.