Cooking With Sensory Differences

Cooking does not have to look or feel the same for everyone. The aim is safe, manageable food preparation, not tolerating discomfort at any cost.

Why cooking can feel overwhelming

A kitchen brings together competing sensory information: extractor fans, sizzling pans, bright lights, strong aromas, slippery ingredients, heat, steam and multiple tasks. Sensory sensitivity, sensory seeking, anxiety, fatigue and difficulties with planning can each change how manageable cooking feels from one day to another.

Recognising your sensory patterns

- **Sound:** buzzing appliances, chopping, boiling kettles or several noises at once can make concentration difficult.
- **Smell:** frying onions, spices, fish or food waste may feel intense, linger on clothes or reduce appetite.
- **Touch and texture:** sticky dough, raw meat, wet vegetables, washing-up water and unexpected splashes may be unpleasant.
- **Temperature:** heat from ovens, hot steam or moving between cold and warm surfaces can increase discomfort.
- **Light and visual clutter:** glare, crowded worktops, packaging and many visible ingredients can make decisions harder.
- **Taste and food predictability:** changes in texture, brands or presentation may make otherwise familiar food difficult to eat.

Notice what changes the experience

Consider the time of day, hunger, tiredness, competing demands, background noise and whether somebody else is using the kitchen. You may find a task easy one day and inaccessible another. This is useful information for planning, not evidence of failure.

A two-minute sensory check-in

Before starting: What feels most difficult today? What would make the space easier? Which part of this meal is essential, and which parts could be simplified?

During cooking: Is the noise, smell, heat or number of steps increasing? Can I pause safely, turn down an appliance, open a window or ask for help?

Afterwards: Which adjustment helped? What could I prepare differently next time?

Make the Kitchen Work for You

Adjust the environment

• **Reduce noise:** cook when the kitchen is quieter; use an appliance only when needed. Hearing protection may help, but make sure you can still notice alarms and other safety cues.

• **Manage smells:** use ventilation, lids or lower-odour cooking methods where appropriate. Try preparing ingredients before strong smells begin.

• **Make touch easier:** use utensils, food-safe gloves when appropriate, tongs or a spoon instead of touching uncomfortable textures directly.

• **Control visual load:** clear one small preparation area, place only the next ingredients in view and use a tray to group equipment.

• **Reduce heat and steam:** choose microwave, air-fryer or cold-preparation options when suitable; open lids away from your face and use dry oven gloves.

Break the meal into predictable stages

1. Choose: select a familiar meal or a low-effort option. Ready-prepared ingredients and repeat meals are valid choices.
2. Gather: place ingredients, utensils and a clean board together before heating anything.
3. Prepare: wash produce as appropriate, cut ingredients and put packaging in the bin.
4. Cook: use a timer, follow package instructions and check that food is cooked safely.
5. Finish: turn off heat, store leftovers promptly and clean the food-contact surfaces that need it.

Food safety without excessive checking

Wash hands with soap and water before food preparation and after handling raw meat, poultry, eggs or contaminated items. Keep raw meat separate from ready-to-eat food. Follow storage dates and instructions; refrigerate perishable food promptly. Use a food thermometer when one is needed for safe cooking rather than relying on repeated visual checks.

A helpful boundary: one clear safety check using the correct method is more useful than repeatedly checking because you feel uncertain.

When you need a pause

Turn off or safely pause active heat before leaving the cooking area. Move sharp utensils out of the way, take a short break in a quieter space and return to one written next step. If you cannot return safely, choose a simpler food option.

My Sensory-Friendly Cooking Plan

1. Choose a manageable meal

My meal: _____

Why this meal works for me: _____

A simpler alternative if today is difficult: _____

2. Identify my sensory needs

Sounds I want to reduce: _____

Smells or textures I want to manage: _____

Lighting, temperature or space adjustments: _____

3. My preparation sequence

Before cooking, I will gather: _____

My first step: _____

My second step: _____

My third step: _____

A timer, visual prompt or support person that could help: _____

4. My safety essentials

- Wash hands at the relevant times and use clean equipment.
- Separate raw and ready-to-eat foods; follow cooking and storage instructions.
- Check that heat is switched off and store perishable leftovers promptly.

5. If overwhelm increases

The first sign I notice: _____

One safe way I can pause: _____

A person or tool that can help: _____

6. Reflect without judging

What felt easier than expected? _____

What would I change next time? _____

Independence can include adaptations, shortcuts, prepared foods, shared cooking and asking for support. Progress is about finding a way that works for you.