

Bad Breath (Halitosis)

In most cases of persistent bad breath, the smell comes from a build up of bacteria within the mouth - in food debris, plaque and gum disease, or in a 'coating' on the back of the tongue. Good oral hygiene will often solve the problem. That is, regular teeth brushing, flossing, cleaning the tongue, and antiseptic mouthwashes. Other causes of persistent bad breath are uncommon.

What is bad breath?

Bad breath, sometimes called halitosis, means that you have an unpleasant smell on your breath that other people notice when you speak or breathe out. The exact number of people with bad breath is not known, but it is common.

How can I tell if I have bad breath?

A main problem with bad breath is that the only person not to notice it is the person affected. (You get used to your own smell and do not tend to notice your own bad breath.) Often, the only way to know about it is if a person comments on it. However, most people are too polite to comment on another person's bad breath. You may have to rely on a family member or a close friend to be honest and tell you if you have bad breath.

Perhaps you could ask your dentist next time you have a check up. A dentist will normally be able to say if you have bad breath. Gum disease is a common cause of bad breath and a dentist will be able to advise on treatment if you have gum disease.

Some people suggest a simple test which you can do yourself to detect bad breath. Lick the inside of your wrist. Wait a few seconds for the saliva to dry. Then smell the licked part of the wrist. If you detect an unpleasant smell you are likely to have bad breath.

Causes and types of bad breath

Coming from within the mouth

Most cases of bad breath come from problems within the mouth such as poor oral hygiene or gum disease. This is discussed in more detail later in the leaflet.

Morning bad breath

Most people have some degree of bad breath after a night's sleep. This is normal and occurs because the mouth tends to get dry and stagnate overnight. This usually clears when the flow of saliva increases soon after starting to eat breakfast.

Foods, drinks and medicines

Chemicals in foods can get into the bloodstream, and then be breathed out from the lungs. Most people are familiar with the smell of garlic, spicy foods and alcoholic drinks on the breath of people who have recently eaten or drunk these. Various other foods and medicines can cause a smell on the breath. This type of bad breath is temporary and easily cured by not eating the food. (However, some people eat spiced food every day and as a result will constantly have a typical smell on their breath.)

If a medicine is causing the problem then discuss possible alternatives with your doctor.

Smoking

Most non-smokers can tell if a person is a smoker by their breath which 'smells like an ashtray'. Stopping smoking is the only cure for this type of bad breath. Smoking also increases the risk of developing gum disease, another cause of bad breath.

Crash dieting or fasting

Can cause a 'sickly sweet smell' on the breath. This is due to chemicals called ketones being made by the breakdown of fat. Some ketones are then breathed out with each breath.

Medical causes

Other medical causes are uncommon. Some people with nose problems can get bad breath. For example, a polyp in a nose, sinusitis or a 'foreign body' stuck in a nostril (occurs most commonly in children) can cause a bad smell. In this situation the smell tends to occur only, or more severely, when you breathe out through your nose. It is not so noticeable when you breathe out through your mouth. Lung or tonsil infections are sometimes a cause. Other causes are rare.

However, in these 'medical' cases, there are usually other symptoms that would indicate the cause. For example, a blocked nose, sinus pain, chest symptoms, etc. If you are otherwise well and have no other symptoms apart from bad breath, the bad smell is likely to be coming from the mouth and other 'medical' causes are unlikely.

Bad breath coming from within the mouth

As mentioned, in most people who have bad breath the bad smell is thought to come from bacteria within the mouth. As the bacteria break down proteins and other debris in the mouth, they release foul smelling gases. One or more of the following may contribute to the build up of bacteria and bad breath.

- **Food stuck between teeth.** Normal teeth brushing may not clear bits of food (particularly tiny bits of meat) which can get stuck between teeth. The food then rots and becomes riddled with bacteria. Regular flossing can clear and prevent this problem.
- **Plaque, calculus and gum disease.** Dental plaque is a soft whitish deposit that forms on the surface of teeth. It forms when bacteria combine with food and saliva. Plaque contains many types of bacteria. Calculus, sometimes called tartar, is hardened calcified plaque. It sticks firmly to teeth. Gum disease means infection or inflammation of the tissues that surround the teeth. If your gums look inflamed, or regularly bleed when you clean your teeth, you are likely to have gum disease. The severity can range from mild to severe.
- **Coating on the back of the tongue.** In some people, a 'coating' develops on the back part of the tongue. It is not clear why this occurs. It may be from mucus that drips down from the back of the nose ('post nasal drip'). The coating can contain many bacteria.
- Mouth tumours that ulcerate and become infected are an uncommon cause of bad breath.

The treatment of bad breath coming from within the mouth is good oral hygiene.

Routine oral hygiene - a cure for most cases of bad breath

It is important to get into a regular habit of good oral hygiene - in particular teeth brushing and flossing.

Teeth brushing

Brush your teeth at least twice a day. Use a soft-tufted brush. The head of the brush should be small enough to get into all the areas of the mouth. Spend at least two minutes brushing, covering all areas (the inside, outside, and biting areas of each tooth). Pay particular attention to where the teeth meet the gum. Get a new toothbrush every 3-4 months. Many people find that an electric toothbrush does a better job than the traditional toothbrush, and so they have become popular.

It is usually advised that you use a toothpaste that contains fluoride. (The fluoride helps to prevent tooth decay.)

Flossing

Floss your teeth at least once a day after brushing, and preferably twice a day. (Some people who have not flossed before are surprised as to how much extra debris and food particles can be removed by flossing in addition to brushing.)

If you are not sure how to floss, then ask your dentist or dental hygienist. Briefly: the usual floss looks a bit like cotton thread. Cut off about 40 cm. Wind the ends round your middle fingers of each hand. Then grab the floss between the thumbs and first finger to obtain a tight 3-4 cm section which you can pull between teeth. Gently scrape the floss against the sides of each tooth from the gum outwards. This will clean the narrow spaces between the teeth which toothbrushes cannot get to. Use a fresh piece of floss each time.

Some people prefer floss 'tape' which slides between teeth more easily than normal floss. Also, some people use disposable plastic 'forks' with a small length of floss between the two prongs. The plastic fork may be easier to hold and manipulate. However, they are expensive.

The gums may bleed a little when you first begin to floss. This should settle within a few days. If it persists then see a dentist as regular bleeding after flossing may indicate early gum disease.

Other general tips

Other things which are important to keep your teeth and gums healthy are:

- If you smoke, try to stop. Gum disease is more common in smokers than non-smokers.
- Eat a well balanced healthy diet. In particular, you should limit the amount of sugary foods and drinks that you have. Sugars and sugary foods in the mouth are the main foods that bacteria thrive on to make acid which can contribute to tooth decay.
- If children need medicines, wherever possible use sugar free medicines.
- Have regular dental checks at intervals recommended by your dentist (this is normally at least once a year). A dentist can detect excessive build up of plaque and remove calculus. Early gum disease can be detected and treated to prevent it from getting worse.

Other things you can do if you have bad breath

The measures above are usually sufficient to look after your teeth. However, if you also have bad breath coming from your mouth:

- Use an antiseptic mouthwash at least once a day. Just before bedtime is probably the best time. The mouthwash aims to kill bacteria. (Young children should not use a mouthwash if they may swallow it.)
- Clean the back of your tongue at least once a day. Some people do this with a soft toothbrush dipped in mouthwash (not toothpaste). An easier way is to buy a special plastic tongue scraper from a pharmacy. You need to place it as far back as you can and then gently scrape forward to clear the tongue of any coating.
- Some people chew *sugar free* gum after each meal. Chewing gum increases the flow of saliva. Saliva helps to 'flush' the mouth to help clear any debris remaining from the meal.
- If you have dentures and have bad breath, you may not be cleaning them properly. Ask your dentist for advice as to how best to clean your dentures.

Further help and advice

British Dental Health Foundation

Helpline: 0845 063 1188 Web: www.dentalhealth.org.uk

Runs a free helpline providing independent and impartial advice on all aspects of oral health.

References

1. [M Rosenberg](#) Clinical assessment of bad breath: current concepts *Journal of the American Dental Association* 127:475-482, 1996
2. [Halitosis](#) *Clinical Evidence* Search date December 2003
3. [Feller L and Blignaut E](#) Halitosis: a review *SADJ* 2005 Feb;60(1):17-9.