

What you should know about bad breath

Although it might be right under their noses, some people aren't aware that they have offensive breath. Bad breath, or halitosis (pronounced "hal-i-TOE-sis"), is an unpleasant condition that often is cause for embarrassment.

Certain foods, tobacco, alcohol and some prescription or over-the-counter drugs may cause mouth odors. In a small percentage of cases, bad breath may have a systemic origin (something that affects the body generally) such as a respiratory tract condition or other ailments.

However, a major source of bad breath in healthy people is microbial deposits on the tongue, especially the back of the tongue, where a bacterial coating harbors organisms and debris that contribute to bad breath. Some studies have shown that simply brushing the tongue reduced bad breath measurements by 70 percent.

Food stuck between teeth, around the gums and on the tongue may leave an unpleasant odor as it decays. Dentures that are not cleaned properly also can harbor odor-causing food and bacteria.

Certain foods, such as garlic and onions, contribute to objectionable breath because they contain odor-causing compounds. When these compounds enter the bloodstream, they are transferred to the lungs, where they are exhaled. Using mouthwash temporarily masks mouth odor. Few studies have examined the long-term effectiveness of a particular mouthwash on reducing bad breath.

Periodontal disease, a condition in which bacteria attack the tissues that surround and support teeth, may play a role in creating bad breath.

Dry mouth, or xerostomia (pronounced "zero-STOW-me-uh"), is another condition that can cause bad breath. Under normal conditions, saliva removes many particles that cause odor. Dry mouth occurs when the flow of saliva decreases. Some medications, salivary gland problems or continuous mouth breathing also may contribute to bad breath. If you have dry mouth, your dentist may prescribe artificial saliva or suggest using sugarless candy and

increasing your fluid intake.

Tobacco products cause bad breath, stain teeth and irritate tissues.

If your dentist rules out the above causes, and you practice good oral hygiene, including thorough tongue-brushing, bad breath may be the result of a local infection in the respiratory tract (nose, throat, windpipe, lungs), chronic sinusitis, postnasal drip, chronic bronchitis, diabetes, gastrointestinal disturbance, or a liver or kidney ailment. If your mouth is healthy, you may be referred to your family doctor or a specialist to determine the cause of your bad breath.

TIPS FOR CONTROLLING BAD BREATH

- Maintain a healthy smile. Schedule regular dental visits. If you are concerned that you have constant bad breath, keep a log of what you eat.
- Make a list of over-the-counter and prescribed medications that you take and bring it to your next checkup. Let your dentist know if you've had any surgery or illness or whether your medical history has changed since your last visit. And avoid constant use of breath mints and other hard candies containing sugar, which may cause tooth decay.
- Look for oral hygiene products that display the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance. Brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste and take time to brush your tongue. Once a day, use floss or another interdental cleaner to clean between teeth. If you wear removable dentures, take them out at night. Clean them thoroughly before replacing them the next morning.
- If you need extra help in controlling plaque, your dentist may recommend using a special antimicrobial mouthrinse. A fluoride mouthrinse, used along with brushing and flossing, can help prevent tooth decay.
- If you're concerned about bad breath, talk to your dentist. He or she can help identify the cause and, if it's due to an oral condition, develop a treatment plan to help eliminate it. ■

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