

Bad Breath (Halitosis)

Bad Breath (Halitosis) Overview

Whether you call it bad breath or halitosis, it's an unpleasant condition that's cause for embarrassment. Some people with bad breath aren't even aware there's a problem. If you're concerned about bad breath, see 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.

What you eat affects the air you exhale. Certain foods, such as garlic and onions, contribute to objectionable breath odor. Once the food is absorbed into the bloodstream, it is transferred to the lungs, where it is expelled. Brushing, flossing and mouthwash will only mask the odor temporarily. Odors continue until the body eliminates the food. Dieters may develop unpleasant breath from infrequent eating.

If you don't brush and floss daily, particles of food remain in the mouth, collecting bacteria, which can cause bad breath. Food that collects between the teeth, on the tongue and around the gums can rot, leaving an unpleasant odor.

Bad breath can also be caused by dry mouth (xerostomia), which occurs when the flow of saliva decreases. Saliva is necessary to cleanse the mouth and remove particles that may cause odor. Dry mouth may be caused by various medications, salivary gland problems or continuously breathing through the mouth. If you suffer from dry mouth, your dentist may prescribe an artificial saliva, or suggest using sugarless candy and increasing your fluid intake.

Tobacco products cause bad breath. If you use tobacco, ask your dentist for tips on kicking the habit.

Bad breath may be the sign of a medical disorder, such as a local infection in the respiratory tract, chronic sinusitis, postnasal drip, chronic bronchitis, diabetes, gastrointestinal disturbance, liver or kidney ailment. If your dentist determines that your mouth is healthy, you may be referred to your family doctor or a specialist to determine the cause of bad breath.

Maintaining good oral health is essential to reducing bad breath. Schedule regular dental visits for a professional cleaning and checkup. If you think you have constant bad breath, keep a log of the foods you eat and make a list of medications you take. Some medications may play a role in creating mouth odors. Let your dentist know if you've had any surgery or illness since your last appointment.

Brush twice a day with fluoride toothpaste to remove food debris and plaque. Brush your tongue, too. Once a day, use floss or an interdental cleaner to clean between teeth.

Mouthwashes are generally cosmetic and do not have a long-lasting effect on bad breath. If you must constantly use a breath freshener to hide unpleasant mouth odor, see your dentist. If you need extra help in controlling plaque, your dentist may recommend using a special antimicrobial mouth rinse. A fluoride mouth rinse, used along with brushing and flossing, can help prevent tooth decay.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

- **What causes bad breath?**

- What you eat affects the air you exhale. Certain foods, such as garlic and onions, contribute to objectionable breath odor. Once the food is absorbed into the bloodstream, it is transferred to the lungs, where it is expelled. Brushing, flossing and mouthwash will only mask the odor temporarily. Odors continue until the body eliminates the food. Dieters may develop unpleasant breath from infrequent eating.
- If you don't brush and floss daily, particles of food remain in the mouth, collecting bacteria, which can cause bad breath. Food that collects between the teeth, on the tongue and around the gums can rot, leaving an unpleasant odor. Dentures that are not cleaned properly can also harbor odor-causing bacteria and food particles.
- One of the warning signs of periodontal (gum) disease is persistent bad breath or a bad taste in the mouth. Periodontal disease is caused by plaque, the sticky, colorless film of bacteria that constantly forms on teeth. The bacteria create toxins that irritate the gums. In the advanced stage of the disease, the gums, bone and other structures that support the teeth become damaged. With regular dental checkups, your dentist can detect and treat periodontal disease early.
- Bad breath is also caused by dry mouth (xerostomia), which occurs when the flow of saliva decreases. Saliva is necessary to cleanse the mouth and remove particles that may cause odor. Dry mouth may be caused by various medications, salivary gland problems or continuously breathing through the mouth. If you suffer from dry mouth, your dentist may prescribe an artificial saliva, or suggest using sugarless candy and increasing your fluid intake.
- Tobacco products cause bad breath, stain teeth, reduce one's ability to taste foods and irritate gum tissues. Tobacco users are more likely to suffer from periodontal disease and are at greater risk for developing oral cancer. If you use tobacco, ask your dentist for tips on kicking the habit.
- Bad breath may be the sign of a medical disorder, such as a local infection in the respiratory tract (nose throat, windpipe, lungs), chronic sinusitis, postnasal drip, chronic bronchitis, diabetes, gastrointestinal disturbance, liver or kidney ailment. If your dentist determines that your mouth is healthy, you may be referred to your family doctor or a specialist to determine the cause of bad breath.
- Eliminating periodontal disease and maintaining good oral health is essential to reducing bad breath. Schedule regular dental visits for a professional cleaning and checkup. If you think you have constant bad breath, keep a log of the foods you eat and make a list of medications you take. Some medications may play a role in creating mouth odors. Let your dentist know if you've had any surgery or illness since your last appointment.

- Brush twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste to remove food debris and plaque. Brush your tongue, too. Once a day, use floss or an 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.
- Mouthwashes are generally cosmetic and do not have a long-lasting effect on bad breath. If you must constantly use a breath freshener to hide unpleasant mouth odor, see your dentist. 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.
- Look for products that carry the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance. Products that display the seal have undergone strict testing for safety and effectiveness.
- **What can I do about bad breath?**
 - Regular checkups will allow your dentist to detect any problems such as periodontal (gum) disease, a dry mouth or other disorders that may be the cause. Maintaining good oral hygiene, eliminating periodontal (gum) disease and scheduling regular professional cleanings are essential to reducing bad breath.
 - Regardless of what may be the cause, good oral hygiene is essential. Brush twice a day and clean between your teeth daily with floss or interdental cleaners. Brush your tongue, too. If you wear dentures, be sure to remove them at night and clean them thoroughly before replacing them the next morning. If you don't already have a dentist, see *Manage Your Oral Health: You & Your Dentist*.
- **How do I find a dentist who treats bad breath?**
 - Dentists are taught in dental school about the oral causes of bad breath (halitosis). If you have bad breath, you may want to start by talking to your general dentist about treatment options. You can also contact your state dental association to see what resources are available in your area of the country.
- **What is the treatment for bad breath?**
 - If your dentist determines that your mouth is healthy and that the odor is not of oral origin, you may be referred to your family physician or to a specialist to determine the cause of the odor and for treatment. Of course, if the odor is of oral origin, as it is in the majority of cases, your dentist can treat the cause of the problem.
 - If the odor is due to periodontal (gum) disease, your general dentist can either treat the disease or refer you to a periodontist, a specialist in treating gum tissues. Periodontal (gum) disease can cause gum tissues to pull away from the teeth and form pockets. When these pockets are deep, only a professional periodontal cleaning can remove the bacteria and plaque that accumulate. Sometimes more extensive treatment is necessary.

- If you have extensive build-up of plaque, an invisible layer of bacteria, your dentist may recommend using a special antimicrobial mouthrinse. Your dentist may also recommend that when you brush your teeth, you also brush your tongue to remove excess plaque.
- **Where can I get products that will be useful in treating bad breath?**
 - After determining the cause of your halitosis, your dentist will be able to prescribe or recommend those products that can be helpful for you. See Products with the ADA Seal of Acceptance.
- **How Effective Are "Halitosis Kits" and Other Products That Claim to Treat Bad Breath?**
 - The ADA cannot vouch for the claims the manufacturers of halitosis kits make. If you are concerned about their safety and effectiveness, you can ask your dentist if the products in the kit will be useful for you.
 - Many antiseptic mouthrinse products, however, have been accepted by the ADA for their therapeutic benefits in reducing plaque and gingivitis and also have breath freshening properties. Instead of simply masking breath odor, these products have been demonstrated to kill the germs that cause bad breath. You may wish to ask your dentist about trying some of these products.