

Taking Your Bad Breath Away

Many of us are so busy we can barely catch our breath. But for the millions of Americans who suffer from chronic halitosis, or bad breath, the joys of everyday life can be anything but breathtaking.

It's estimated that 25% of the population suffers from chronic halitosis, which can be a very embarrassing problem and can seriously affect one's business and social life. If you don't brush and floss daily, particles of food remain in the mouth and collect bacteria, which can cause bad breath.

The surface of the tongue is one of the major breeding grounds for bacteria that attack the teeth and gums, causing bad breath.

The easiest way to clean your tongue is simply to brush it when you brush your teeth. Because many bad breath odors stem from the back of the tongue, it's especially important to thoroughly brush that area. And don't forget to brush the sides of your tongue, since plaque can form there, too.

But if you want the ultimate level of tongue hygiene, you can buy a tongue scraper. These scrapers, which are available at most pharmacies, are specifically designed for tongue cleaning. To use a tongue scraper, glide it firmly across the top and sides of your tongue.

Chronic bad breath can be caused by a number of things. So before you start spending money on products that may not work on a long-term basis, it's really important that a dentist diagnose the source of the problem first.

Medical Disorder

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; or a liver or kidney ailment. Therefore, 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.

Medications and Foods

Taking certain medications may play a role in mouth odor. In addition, certain foods, such as onions and garlic, can be absorbed into the bloodstream and then move into the lungs, where they are expelled, causing bad breath. Keeping a log of foods eaten and medications taken will help your dentist make a determination regarding what to recommend for the problem.

Tobacco Products

Not only does tobacco cause bad breath, stain teeth, reduce one's ability to taste foods, and irritate gum tissues, but tobacco users are more likely to suffer from periodontal disease and at greater risk for developing oral cancer. If you use tobacco, ask your dentist for tips on kicking the habit.



Dry Mouth

Saliva is essential for cleaning the mouth and removing particles that may cause odor. Dry mouth can be caused by dehydration, some medications, or the bad habit of constantly breathing through the mouth. To help, a dentist may suggest using sugarless candy or a special mouthrinse, or to increase fluid intake.

Periodontal (Gum) Disease

It's also important to remember that bad breath may be a sign of something more serious, such as periodontal (or gum) disease. If gum disease is diagnosed, a general dentist may refer you to a periodontist, a specialist in gum disease. One of the warning signs of periodontal disease is persistent bad breath. Gum disease can cause gum tissues to pull away from the teeth and form pockets. Bacteria sits inside these pockets, causing odor. The deeper the pocket means more bacteria and more difficulty cleaning it out yourself. At times, only a professional periodontal cleaning can remove extensive bacteria and plaque.

Although many people may be anxious to solve their mouth odor with a quick fix, the Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) cautions consumers about some breath products on the market. Over-the-counter mouthwashes and breath mints are fine if you want to get rid of a temporary mouth odor; however, if you frequently have to use a mouthwash or mint to cover up breath problems, your dentist may suggest a special antimicrobial mouthwash, which has been shown to reduce plaque and gum disease, while featuring breath-freshening properties. Instead of just temporarily solving breath odor, these products actually kill the germs that cause halitosis.

The MDS suggests that maintaining good oral health is necessary to avoid many dental problems, including bad breath, before they occur. For more information on bad breath and your oral health, visit massdental.org.