

# Targeting bad breath



**M**any factors can cause bad breath (also known as *halitosis*), including underlying medical conditions, foods we eat, and our oral hygiene habits. Among the most common triggers are:

- **Oral diseases, like gum disease or tooth decay.**
- **Dry mouth.** Typically, saliva keeps your oral tissues moist and helps cleanse food particles from your mouth, but many factors can cause you to have a low saliva flow: medications, salivary gland problems, tobacco use, and so on. This low saliva flow dries out your mouth, increasing the risk of bad breath.
- **Medical conditions or medications.** Some diseases have symptoms related to bad breath. For example, sinus or lung infections, tonsillitis, gastrointestinal disorders, bronchitis, diabetes, and some liver or kidney diseases may be associated with bad breath. A number of medications also may produce an unpleasant taste or odor or may cause dry mouth, which in turn leads to bad breath. You may want to check the label for oral side effects.
- **Poor oral hygiene.** If food particles are not removed with proper oral hygiene, they will collect along your gum line, between your teeth, and on the rough surface of your tongue, where bacteria break them down, which can cause oral odor.
- **Foods and drinks.** Some foods and drinks contain odor-causing compounds that can be absorbed by the body during digestion and later exhaled or secreted in the saliva.
- **Tobacco use.** Smoking and using other tobacco products can contribute to an unpleasant mouth odor. Also, use of these products may lead to an increase in gum disease, which is a source of bad breath itself.

## HOW CAN I STOP BAD BREATH?

The first step in stopping your bad breath is tracking down the cause. Your dentist can be a big help here. He or she can examine your mouth to rule out any oral health problems, like gum disease, tooth decay, or low salivary flow. If no concerns turn up on the oral health front, your dentist may refer you to your physician to check for other medical causes or go over your medications.

A professional dental cleaning can be performed to remove hardened plaque, or tartar, along and beneath your gum line, where bacteria can hide. Then, together, you and your dentist or hygienist can go over your oral hygiene habits. Good oral hygiene is essential to fending off bad breath. The American Dental Association

recommends that you brush your teeth twice daily for 2 minutes using a soft-bristled brush and a fluoride-containing toothpaste, and clean between your teeth once a day. Brush your tongue, too.

If you wear dentures or a removable dental appliance, talk to your dentist about how best to clean and care for it. If dry mouth seems to be a problem, your dentist may suggest use of an artificial saliva or chewing on sugarless gum to stimulate saliva flow.

## TAKING CONTROL OF BAD BREATH

Here are some basic steps that can help you control bad breath:

- **See your dentist.** Stop in for an examination and a professional cleaning on a regular basis. Be prepared to tell your dentist about any medications you are taking and any changes in your health, including temporary illnesses or development of new health conditions.
- **Keep it clean.** Keep up with your daily oral hygiene. Brush your teeth twice a day for 2 minutes with a fluoride-containing toothpaste and clean between your teeth once a day with dental floss, prethreaded flossers, tiny brushes that reach between the teeth, water flossers, or wooden plaque removers. You may want to add a mouthrinse to help wash away debris and freshen breath. Toothpastes that help fight oral odor also are available.
- **Shop smart.** Look for the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance when shopping for oral health care products, such as toothpastes and mouthrinses. The seal indicates that the product has been evaluated scientifically by an independent group of experts and that it is safe and effective when used as directed.
- **Stop tobacco use.** ■



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Prepared by Anita M. Mark, manager, Scientific Information Development, ADA Science Institute, American Dental Association, Chicago, IL.

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