

Don't Hold Your Breath

Have you ever been offered a stick of gum or mouth mint for no apparent reason? Do people back away from you when you're talking to them? If you answered yes to either of these questions, you may have bad breath. The scientific name for bad breath is halitosis, and it is estimated to be the third most common reason for seeking dental care after tooth decay and periodontal disease.

In most cases bad breath originates in the mouth. The food that you eat can play a significant role in odor formation. If you don't brush and floss daily, food particles in and around your teeth will break down and rot, leaving an unpleasant odor. In addition, eating foods that contain volatile oils can also cause bad breath. Onions and garlic are the best-known examples, but other vegetables, spices, and cheese can cause bad breath. Once the food is absorbed into the bloodstream, it is transferred to the lungs, where it is expelled as you exhale. Brushing, flossing, and mouthwash will only mask the odor temporarily. The odors will continue to be given off in your breath until the food is eliminated from your body.

The source of bad breath

Dental problems are also a common source of bad breath. Periodontal disease and dental decay are both bacteria-derived problems. Periodontal disease is caused by plaque, which is a sticky film of bacteria that continually forms on teeth. If this plaque is allowed to persist under the gumline, the bacteria cause a chronic infection. The infection and the metabolic breakdown products of bacteria will cause the odor.

Dental decay is also a product of plaque accumulation on teeth. The bacteria within the plaque metabolize sugars into lactic acid, which dissolves the calcium out of the enamel. The resulting tooth decay can contribute to halitosis.

Other culprits

Dry mouth conditions, also known as xerostomia, have also been known to cause halitosis. Xeros-

tomia occurs when your salivary flow decreases, which can occur because of aging, due to the use of various medications, as a result of salivary gland problems, or because of continuously breathing through your mouth. Normally, saliva acts as a mouth lubricant and cleansing agent. Without it, food particles, bacteria, and skin cells collect on your tongue, gums, and teeth, which then decompose and cause odor.

Of course, tobacco products not only cause bad breath due to their own unpleasant odor, but they also stain teeth, reduce your ability to taste foods, and irritate gum tissue. Tobacco users are more likely to suffer from xerostomia and periodontal disease, which compounds the bad breath. Tobacco users are also at a greater risk for developing cancer.

Look for medical causes

When the origin of bad breath has been determined not to be from a mouth origin, there are many medical problems that can be the culprit. Problems of the respiratory tract including sinus infections, postnasal drip, and chronic bronchitis are known ailments to cause a foul odor. Other illnesses such as diabetes, liver or kidney problems, and cancer can also cause bad breath. If your dentist determines that your mouth is healthy, you may be referred to your family doctor to investigate any medical cause of the bad breath.

Practice oral hygiene

Strategies to eliminate bad breath are mainly directed at practicing good oral hygiene. Not only should you be brushing your teeth twice a day and flossing between your teeth once a day, but you should be brushing your tongue as well. Mouthwashes with the ADA seal of acceptance may also reduce the bacteria that contributes to bad breath. Chewing a sugarless gum is also helpful, as it increases the flow of saliva and mechanically cleans the oral tissues of debris. Finally, drinking plenty of water throughout the day keeps the mouth hydrated and increases salivary flow.

PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO



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Bad breath is a common problem that is conservatively estimated to affect almost 25 percent of the population at some time in people's lives. But there is no need to hold your breath. The first step is to see your dentist, who can do a thorough examination and give recommendations to treat the disorder. 