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Comprehensive medical centre

BAD BREATH



Q. What is bad breath?

A. Bad breath (halitosis), means that you have an unpleasant smell on your breath that other people notice when you speak or breathe out. The exact number of people with bad breath is not known, but it is common.

Q. How can I tell if I have bad breath?

A. Lots of small signs can show that you have bad breath. Have you noticed people stepping away from you when you start to talk? Do people turn their cheek when you kiss them goodbye?

If you think you might have bad breath, there is a simple test that you can do. Just lick the inside of your wrist and sniff - if the smell is bad, you can be fairly sure that your breath is too.

Or, ask a very good friend to be absolutely honest with you; but do make sure they are a true friend.

Q. What are the causes and types of bad breath?

Coming from within the mouth

Most cases of bad breath (halitosis) come from germs (bacteria) or debris that builds up within the mouth. This is discussed in more detail later in the leaflet.

Morning bad breath

Most people have some degree of bad breath after a night's sleep. This is normal and occurs because the mouth tends to get dry and stagnate overnight. This usually clears when the flow of saliva increases soon after starting to eat breakfast.

Dry mouth (xerostomia)

Bad breath associated with a dry mouth is caused by a reduction in the cleansing mechanism of the mouth as a result of reduced flow of saliva. There are many causes of a dry mouth. The most common cause is after a night's sleep (discussed above). Dry mouth may also occur:

- Due to a lack of fluid in the body (dehydration).
- As a side-effect of some medicines (for example, tricyclic antidepressants).
- As a symptom of some diseases (such as Sjögren's syndrome).
- Following radiotherapy to the head and neck region.

Foods, drinks and medicines

Chemicals in foods can get into the bloodstream, and then be breathed out from the lungs. Most people are familiar with the smell of garlic, spicy foods and alcoholic drinks on the breath of people who have recently eaten or drunk these. Various other foods and medicines can cause a smell on the breath. This type of bad breath is temporary and easily cured by not eating the food. (However, some people eat spiced food every day. As a result, they will constantly have a typical smell on their breath.) If a medicine is causing the problem then discuss possible alternatives with your doctor. Medicines that have been associated with bad breath include:

- Betel Chloral hydrate.
- Nitrites and nitrates.
- Dimethyl sulfoxide
- Disulfiram
- Some chemotherapy medicines
- Phenothiazines
- Amphetamines

Smoking

Most non-smokers can tell if a person is a smoker by their breath which "smells like an ashtray". Stopping smoking is the only cure for this type of bad breath. Smoking also increases the risk of developing gum disease - another cause of bad breath.

Crash dieting or fasting

Can cause a sickly sweet smell on the breath. This is due to chemicals called ketones being made by the breakdown of fat. Some ketones are then breathed out with each breath.

Medical causes

Other medical causes are uncommon. Some people with nasal problems can get bad breath. For example, a lump (polyp) in the nose, sinusitis or a small object stuck in a nostril (occurs most commonly in children) can cause a bad smell. In this situation, the smell tends to occur only, or more severely, when you breathe out through your nose. It is not so noticeable when you breathe out through your mouth. Infections or tumours of the lung, throat, mouth or tonsils are sometimes a cause. Other causes are rare.

However, in these medical cases, there are usually other symptoms that would indicate the cause. For example, a blocked nose, sinus pain, chest symptoms, a high temperature (fever), etc. If you are otherwise well and have no other symptoms apart from bad breath, the smell is likely to be coming from a build-up of bacteria in the mouth and other medical causes are unlikely.

Fish odour syndrome (trimethylaminuria)

This is a rare medical cause but worth being aware of. It typically causes breath and body odour that is often like a fishy smell. It occurs because the body loses the ability to properly break down trimethylamine which is found in certain foods. There is then a build-up of trimethylamine in the body which is released in sweat, urine, and breath. Urine and blood tests can help to confirm this diagnosis if it is suspected.

BAD BREATH COMING FROM WITHIN THE MOUTH

In most people who have bad breath (halitosis), the bad smell is thought to come from germs (bacteria) and debris within the mouth. As the bacteria break down proteins and other debris in the mouth, they release foul-smelling gases. One or more of the following may contribute to the build-up of bacteria, debris and bad breath:

- Food stuck between teeth. Normal teeth brushing may not clear bits of food which can get stuck between teeth. The food then rots and becomes riddled with bacteria. Regular cleaning between the teeth can clear and prevent this problem.
- Plaque, tartar (calculus) and gum disease. Dental plaque is a soft whitish deposit that forms on the surface of teeth. It forms when bacteria combine with food and saliva. Plaque contains many types of bacteria. Calculus is hardened calcified plaque. It sticks firmly to teeth. Gum disease means infection or inflammation of the tissues that surround the teeth. If your gums look inflamed, or regularly bleed when you clean your teeth, you are likely to have gum disease. The severity can range from mild to severe.
- Coating on the back of the tongue. In some people, a coating develops on the back part of the tongue. It is not clear why this occurs.

It may be from mucus that drips down from the back of the nose (postnasal drip). The coating can contain many bacteria. This explains why bad breath can sometimes occur in people with otherwise good oral hygiene.

- Tonsil stones (tonsilloliths). These are clusters of calcified material that form in the tonsillar crypts, or crevices of the tonsils. They are made up mostly of calcium but can contain other ingredients such as magnesium and phosphorus, and can feel like a small lump in the tonsils. Rarely harmful, they can be a nuisance and hard to remove and can often cause bad breath.

Q. How can my dentist help?

A. If you do have bad breath, you will need to start a routine for keeping your mouth clean and fresh. Regular check-ups will allow your dentist to watch out for any places where plaque is caught between your teeth. Your dental team will be able to clean all those areas that are difficult to reach. They will also be able to show you the best way to clean your teeth and gums, and show you any areas you may be missing, including your tongue.

Routine oral hygiene - recommended for everyone

The main treatment of bad breath coming from within the mouth is good oral hygiene. Aim to get into a regular habit of good oral hygiene - in particular, teeth brushing and cleaning between teeth.

Teeth brushing

Brush your teeth at least twice a day. Use a soft-tufted brush and a toothpaste that contains fluoride. The head of the brush should be small enough to get into all the areas of the mouth. Spend at least two minutes brushing, covering all areas (the inside, outside, and biting areas of each tooth). Pay particular attention to where the teeth meet the gum. Get a new toothbrush every 3-4 months. Studies suggest that powered toothbrushes with a rotation-oscillation action (where the brush rapidly changes direction of rotation) remove plaque and debris better than manual brushes. Ideally, brush your teeth either just before eating, or at least an hour after eating. The reason for this is to help prevent tooth erosion.

Many foods contain acids. In particular, fizzy drinks (including fizzy water) and fruit juices.

After your teeth are exposed to acid, the enamel is a little softened, but the action of calcium and other mineral salts in the saliva can help to counteract and reverse this softening.

Therefore, do not brush teeth immediately after eating when the enamel tends to be at its softest. In particular, after eating or drinking acid foods and drinks. It is best to wait at least an hour after eating or drinking anything before brushing.

Cleaning between teeth

Clean between your teeth after brushing once a day, but ideally twice a day. This is to remove plaque from between teeth. Dental floss is commonly used to do this. However, some studies suggest that small interdental brushes may do a better job than floss. The aim is to clean the sides of the teeth where a toothbrush cannot reach. Also, to clear the spaces between teeth (the interdental spaces) of debris. Some people who have not cleaned between their teeth before are surprised as to how much extra debris and food particles can be removed by doing this in addition to brushing. If you are not sure how to clean between your teeth, then ask your dentist or dental hygienist.

Briefly: normal floss looks a bit like cotton thread. Cut off about 40 cm. Wind the ends round your middle fingers of each hand. Then grab the floss between the thumbs and first finger to obtain a tight 3-4 cm section which you can pull between teeth. Gently scrape the floss against the sides of each tooth from the gum outwards. Use a fresh piece of floss each time. Some people prefer floss tape which slides between teeth more easily than normal floss. Also, some people use disposable plastic forks with a small length of floss between the two prongs. These may be easier to hold and manipulate. Some people use sticks, or small interdental brushes to clean the space between the teeth. The gums may bleed a little when you start to clean between your teeth. This should settle in a few days. If it persists, see a dentist, as regular bleeding may indicate gum disease.

Food and drink

Sugars and sugary foods in the mouth are the main foods that germs (bacteria) thrive on to make acid which can contribute to tooth decay. Acid foods and drinks are also a main factor in tooth erosion. So, some tips: Limit the amount of sugary foods and drinks that you have. In particular, don't snack on sugary foods. Try to reduce the amount of acid in contact with your teeth. So, limit fizzy drinks (including fizzy water) and fruit

Perhaps just limit yourself to one fizzy or fruit juice drink a day. Otherwise, choose drinks that are much less acidic, such as still water, and milk, tea, or coffee (without sugar).

Drink any acid drinks, such as fizzy drinks and fruit juices, quickly - don't swish them around your mouth or hold them in your mouth for any period of time. Brush your teeth at least an hour after eating or drinking anything especially acidic foods and drinks. (See above for reasons.) Likewise, do not brush your teeth within an hour of being sick (vomiting), as stomach acid will be part of the vomit.

Other general tips

Other things which are important to keep your teeth and gums healthy are:

- If you smoke, try to stop. Smoking increases the risk of developing gum disease. If children need medicines, wherever possible use sugar-free medicines.
- Have regular dental checks at intervals recommended by your dentist (normally at least once a year). A dentist can detect build-up of plaque and remove tartar (calculus). Early gum disease can be detected and treated to prevent it from getting worse.

Other things you can do if you have bad breath

The measures above are usually sufficient to look after your teeth and to prevent bad breath. However, if you still have bad breath coming from your mouth then the following extra measures will usually cure the problem.

Mouthwashes

Consider using a mouthwash each day. However, you should not use a mouthwash just to disguise bad breath. So if you find that you are using a mouthwash all the time, talk to your dental team. Chemicals in the mouthwash aim to kill germs (bacteria) and/or neutralise any chemicals that cause bad breath. It is difficult to advise on which mouthwash is the most effective. A number of clinical trials have shown that various ingredients are good at reducing bad breath.

These include chlorhexidine, cetylpyridinium chloride, chlorine dioxide, zinc chloride and triclosan. The various mouthwashes that you can buy usually contain one or more of these ingredients, plus various other ingredients.

Note: some people are reluctant to use a chlorhexidine-containing mouthwash long-term. This is because it has an unpleasant taste, can give rise to a burning sensation in the mouth if used too frequently, and can cause (reversible) staining of the teeth or occasionally some temporary darkening of the tongue. Also, some mouthwashes contain alcohol as one of their ingredients. There is some concern that long-term use of alcohol-containing mouthwashes may be a risk factor in the development of a dry mouth. Also, young children should not use a mouthwash if they may swallow it.

Tongue cleaning

Consider cleaning the back of your tongue each day. Some people do this with a soft toothbrush dipped in mouthwash (not toothpaste). An easier and better way is to buy a special plastic tongue scraper from a pharmacy. You need to place it as far back as you can and then gently scrape forward to clear the tongue of any coating. A review in 2006 (cited at the end) concluded that ... "tongue scrapers or cleaners are slightly more effective than toothbrushes as a means of controlling halitosis in adults".

Chewing gum

Some people chew sugar-free gum after each meal. It is not clear how well gum helps to reduce bad breath but chewing gum increases the flow of saliva. Saliva helps to flush the mouth to help clear any debris remaining from the meal.

Q. How can I prevent bad breath if I wear dentures?

A. It is just as important to clean dentures as it is to clean your natural teeth. Bits of food can become caught around the edges of dentures and clasps, and the food can rot if you do not clean them thoroughly.

You should keep a separate toothbrush for cleaning your dentures. The general rule is: brush, soak and brush again. Clean your dentures over a bowl of water in case you drop them. Brush your dentures before soaking them, to help remove any bits of food. Soak the dentures in a specialist cleaner for a short time and then brush the dentures again. Brush them like you would brush your natural teeth.

Make sure you clean all the surfaces of the dentures, including the surface which fits against your gums. If you notice a build-up of stains or scale, have your dentures cleaned by your dental team.

Most dentists still recommend a small- to medium-head toothbrush, or a specialised denture brush if you can get one.

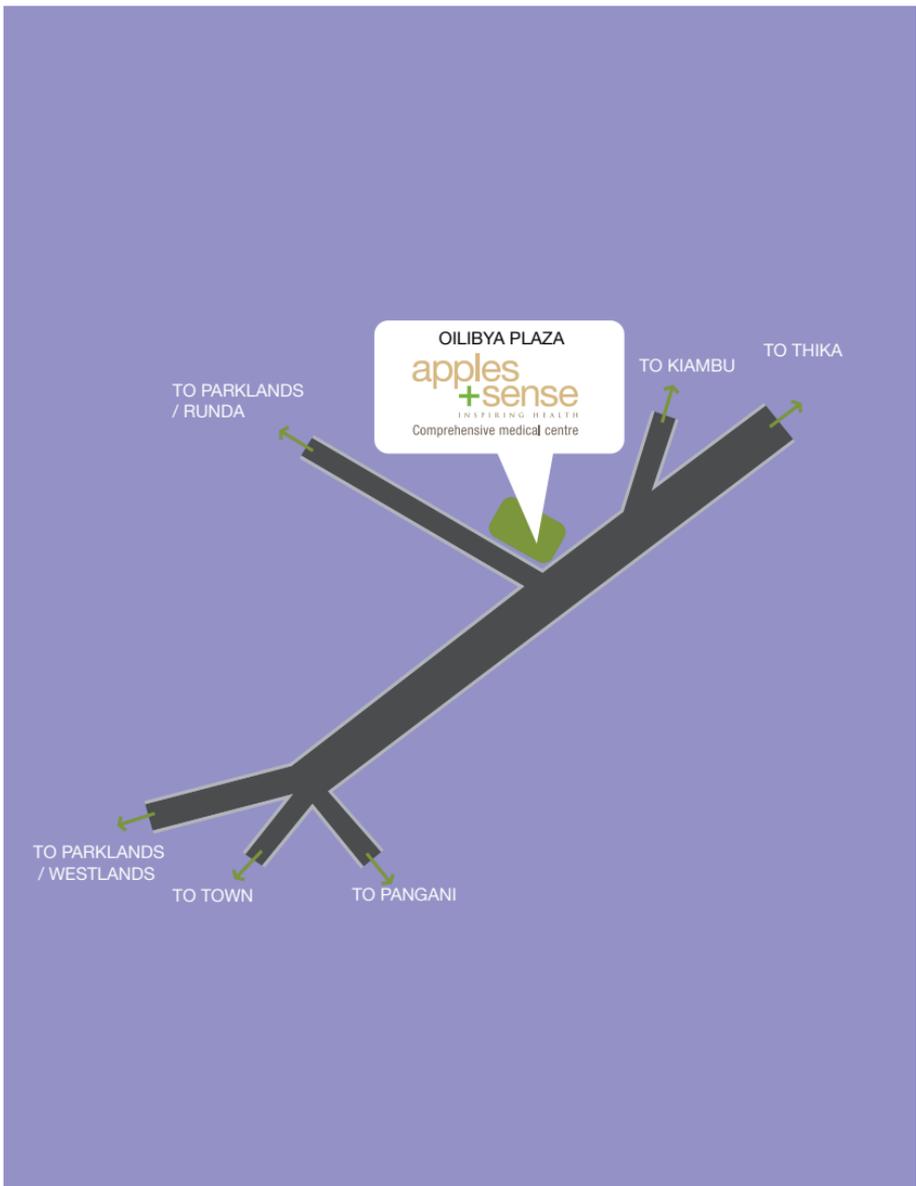
Q.What if the bad breath (halitosis) does not go?

A. If you have done everything you can and still have bad breath then see a doctor or dentist. You may need some tests to assess if you have a less common cause of bad breath.

Q. How can I tell someone they have bad breath?

A. We probably all know someone who has bad breath, but very few people feel brave enough to discuss the problem. It is obviously a very delicate matter to tell someone they have bad breath. There is always the risk that they will be offended or embarrassed and may never speak to you again! However, it is always worth remembering that the bad breath may be caused by any number of problems. Once the person knows they have bad breath, they can deal with whatever is causing it. You could try talking to their partner or a family member, as the bad breath may be caused by a medical condition which is already being treated.





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