

# Bad Breath (Halitosis)

---

From IntelliHealth Dental  
Reviewed by the Editorial Board of The University of Pennsylvania School of  
Dental Medicine

[http://www.intelihealth.com/IH/ihtIH?t=25029&p=~br,IHW|~st,333|~r,WSIHW000|~b,\\*|](http://www.intelihealth.com/IH/ihtIH?t=25029&p=~br,IHW|~st,333|~r,WSIHW000|~b,*|)

## What Is It?

Bad breath (also known as halitosis) is breath containing an unpleasant odor. This odor can strike periodically or be persistent, depending on the cause. In many patients, the millions of bacteria that live in the mouth are the primary culprits of bad breath. The mouth's warm, moist conditions make an ideal environment for these bacteria to grow. About 80 percent of bad breath is caused by something in the mouth.

Some types of bad breath, such as "morning mouth," are considered to be fairly normal, and they are usually not health concerns. The "morning mouth" type of bad breath occurs because the saliva that regularly washes away decaying food and odors during the daytime diminishes at night while you sleep. Your mouth becomes dry, and dead cells adhere to your tongue and to the inside of your cheeks. Bacteria use these cells for food and expel compounds that have a foul odor.

In addition, bad breath can be caused by the following:

- ◆ **Poor dental hygiene** — infrequent or improper brushing and flossing can leave food particles to decay inside the mouth
- ◆ **Local infections in the mouth** — periodontal (gum) disease
- ◆ **Respiratory tract infections** — throat infections, sinus infections, lung infections
- ◆ **External agents** — garlic, onions, coffee, cigarette smoking, chewing tobacco
- ◆ **Dry mouth (xerostomia)** — This can be caused by salivary gland problems, medications or by "mouth breathing"
- ◆ **Systemic illnesses** — diabetes, liver disease, kidney disease, lung disease, sinus disease, reflux disease and others
- ◆ **Psychiatric illness** — Some people may perceive that they have bad breath, but it is not noticed by oral health care professionals or others. This is referred to as "pseudohalitosis."

## Symptoms

A person may not always know that they have bad breath. This phenomenon is based on the fact that odor-detecting cells in the nose eventually become accustomed to the constant flow of bad smells from the mouth. Socially, the worst symptom is simply having bad breath and not realizing it. Others notice, however, and react by recoiling at the smell as you speak.

Other associated symptoms depend on the underlying cause of bad breath:

- ◆ **Poor dental hygiene** — teeth are coated with film or plaque, food debris trapped between teeth, pale or swollen gums
- ◆ **Local infections in the mouth** — gums may be red, swollen and bleed easily, especially after brushing or flossing; pus may drain from between teeth; a pocket of pus (abscess) at the base of a tooth; loose teeth or a change in "fit" of a denture; painful, open sores on the tongue or gums
- ◆ **Respiratory tract infections** — sore throat, swollen lymph nodes ("swollen glands") in the neck, fever, stuffy nose, a greenish or yellowish nasal discharge, a mucus-producing cough
- ◆ **External agents** — cigarette stains on fingers and teeth, a uniform yellow "coffee stain" on teeth
- ◆ **Dry mouth** — difficulty in swallowing dry foods, difficulty speaking for a prolonged period because of mouth dryness, a burning sensation in the mouth, an unusually high number of dental caries, dry eyes (in Sjögren's syndrome)
- ◆ **Systemic illnesses** — symptoms of diabetes, lung disease, kidney failure or liver disease

## Diagnosis

A dentist or physician may notice the patient's bad breath while the patient is discussing his or her medical history and symptoms. In some cases, depending on the smell of the patient's breath, the dentist or physician may suspect a likely cause for the problem. For example, "fruity" breath may be a sign of uncontrolled diabetes mellitus. A urine-like smell, especially in a person who is at high risk for kidney disease, can sometimes indicate kidney failure.

Your dentist will review your medical history for medical conditions that can cause bad breath and for medications that can cause dry mouth. Your dentist also will ask you about your diet, personal habits (smoking, chewing tobacco) and any associated symptoms described above, including when the bad breath was noticed and by whom.

Your dentist will perform a physical examination, which will include an examination of your teeth, gums, oral tissues and salivary glands. He or she also will feel your head and neck and will evaluate your breath when you exhale from your nose and from your mouth. Once the physical examination is finished, your dentist may refer you to your family physician if systemic problems are the most likely cause. In severe cases of gum disease, your dentist may recommend that you be seen by a *periodontist* (dentist who specializes in gum problems).

There may be a need for diagnostic tests if the doctor suspects a lung infection, diabetes, kidney disease, liver disease or Sjögren's syndrome. Depending on the suspected illness, these tests may include blood tests, urine tests, X-rays of the chest or sinuses, or other specialized testing.

## Expected Duration

The duration of bad breath depends on its cause. For example, when the problem is due to poor dental hygiene, proper dental care will begin to freshen the mouth immediately, with even more impressive results after a few days of regular brushing and flossing. Periodontal disease and tooth abscess also respond quickly to proper dental treatment. Bad breath due

sinuses is the underlying cause.

Bad breath due to systemic illness may be a long-term problem that can often be controlled with proper medical care.

## **Prevention**

Bad breath due to dental problems can be easily prevented. Daily maintenance calls for brushing your teeth, tongue and gums after meals, flossing, and rinsing with mouthwashes approved by the American Dental Association. Regular visits to the dentist (twice a year) should be made for dental examinations and for professional teeth and gum cleaning.

Bad breath can also be combated by drinking plenty of water every day to encourage saliva production. An occasional swish of the mouth with water can loosen food particles. Other products that keep breath fresh and prevent plaque from forming include sugar-free gum, sugarless lozenges, raw carrots and celery.

## **Treatment**

The treatment of bad breath depends on its cause.

## **When To Call A Professional**

Call your dentist promptly if you have bad breath with painful, swollen gums that bleed easily or loose teeth. Also, call your doctor if your bad breath occurs together with a fever, sore throat, a postnasal drip, a discolored nasal discharge or a mucus-producing cough. Even if you have none of these associated symptoms, call your dentist or physician if your bad breath persists despite a good diet and proper dental hygiene.

If you are a diabetic or have chronic liver or kidney disease, ask your doctor how bad breath can be a sign that your underlying medical condition needs immediate medical attention.

## **Prognosis**

Once halitosis has been diagnosed, the prognosis for fresh breath is usually excellent as long as you adhere to your dentist's or physician's treatment plan.