

# Bad Breath

## What is bad breath?

Bad breath, also called halitosis, is an unpleasant smell from your mouth or nose. You may not always know when you have bad breath, but others may notice it.

A quick way to check your breath is to lick the side of your finger and then let the saliva dry for a minute or so. Smell the spot and you'll know what your breath smells like. If you use dental floss, try smelling the floss when you are finished to see if you have bad breath.

## What is the cause?

Bad breath is a symptom, not a disease. It may be caused by many things, such as:

- Eating foods such as garlic or onions
- Not brushing and flossing your teeth daily. Food stuck in your teeth and gums after eating is broken down by bacteria in your mouth and this can cause a bad smell.
- Tooth decay and gum disease caused by plaque. Plaque is a sticky material that builds up on your teeth. It is made of mucus and saliva, food particles, acids, and bacteria. If it's not removed with daily brushing and flossing, plaque can lead to cavities, a hard buildup called tartar, and gum disease.
- Smoking and use of other tobacco products
- Dry mouth from medicines you are taking, salivary gland problems, or always breathing through your mouth. With less saliva, your body is not able to completely cleanse your mouth. Bad breath in the morning happens because your body uses up water at night and your mouth dries out.
- Infection in your teeth, gums, sinuses, tonsils, lungs, or digestive system
- Other medical problems, such as diabetes, liver or kidney disease, heartburn, or gastric reflux

## How is it diagnosed?

Your dentist will examine your mouth, looking for tooth decay, pockets of plaque, and gum disease. If your dentist finds that your mouth is healthy, you may be referred to your healthcare provider to check for medical problems that can cause bad breath.

## How can I prevent bad breath?

Here are some things you can do to help prevent bad breath:

- Clean your teeth well. Use a soft-bristled toothbrush and toothpaste that contains fluoride. Brush for at least 2 minutes, at least twice a day. Floss once a day. Cut a piece of floss that is long enough for you to be able to use a fresh

section of floss each time you bring the floss down between two teeth. Don't forget to floss behind your back molars, where a lot of plaque can collect.

- Brush your tongue, especially the back, to remove odor-causing bacteria.
- When you cannot brush after eating, chew sugarless gum. It helps your body make saliva and helps remove plaque. Gum made with a sweetener called Xylitol can help limit the growth of bacteria.
- Drink more water. If you have a dry mouth that does not go away with other treatments, such as drinking more water or chewing gum, your dentist may recommend a saliva replacement product.
- Use a fluoride or alcohol-free antibacterial mouth rinse to help prevent tooth decay.
- Avoid smoking, coffee, alcohol, onions, and garlic.
- You can try drinking tea. Lab studies have shown that black or green tea keeps bacteria in the mouth from making the chemicals that smell bad.
- If you wear dentures, take them out at night to clean them thoroughly. When possible, leave them out to soak while you sleep. Soak them in a denture cleaning solution and then brush them thoroughly to remove molds, fungus, and bacteria. Don't forget to brush all the areas in your mouth that are touched by the dentures.
- See your dentist and dental hygienist as often as recommended for checkups and cleanings. They can check for gum disease or other dental problems.

You can use a mouthwash or other breath freshener to hide bad breath. But if you need to constantly use something to freshen your breath, you should see your dentist or healthcare provider to help find the cause.

You can get more information from:

- American Dental Association  
800-621-8099  
<http://www.mouthhealthy.org/en/>

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