

Oral bacteria responsible for most cases of halitosis

by *Rallie_McAllister*

Everyone has bad breath sometimes, but if the people around you keep getting whiplash whenever you open your mouth, you could have a more serious problem. Halitosis is the official medical term for malodorous breath, defined as any disagreeable odor of expired air.

You're allowed to have bad breath if you've been munching on garlic cloves, but if your breath smells like dirty socks most of the time regardless of what you eat, you may suffer from halitosis. Having bad breath is not your fault – the bacteria inside your mouth are responsible for the offensive odor.

With plenty of leftover food on your tongue and between your teeth to snack on, these mouth-dwelling microbes break down proteins in food particles, creating sulfurous byproducts in the process. The volatile sulfur compounds produced by oral bacteria are similar to the gases released by rotten eggs.

Most people put a serious dent in the bacterial population of their mouths whenever they brush and floss. But even the most militant brushers and flossers tend to neglect their tongues, especially the part at the very back.

Enter the tongue scraper, a specially designed device that effectively cleans the surface of the tongue without gagging you in the process. Tongue scrapers and cleaners can be purchased at pharmacies, supermarkets and dentists' office, but for folks on a budget, a plastic spoon turned upside down works just fine.

Research reveals that the use of tongue scrapers can significantly reduce the number of bacteria in the mouth, as well as the levels of the odiferous volatile sulfur compounds they produce. If your tongue-scraping efforts don't solve the problem completely, a few additional strategies can help detoxify your breath.

Your first order of business is to schedule appointments with your dentist and your family physician to rule out any serious health conditions that might be at the root of the problem. Proper treatment of tooth decay, gum disease, chronic sinus drainage and stomach ulcers can correct many cases of halitosis.

Watching what you eat can bring about significant improvements in your breath. Most food odors dissipate from your breath in about 10 minutes, but odors from smelly foods like peanut butter and chilis can linger for hours.

The odiferous reminders of garlic, onions and alcohol stick around even longer. Odor-producing compounds

in these foods migrate to your bloodstream after digestion, and they're exhaled through your lungs with every breath.

If you've indulged in a malodorous meal, you might try to reverse the damage with breath-freshening gums, mints or sprays — and there are plenty to choose from. The quest for minty-fresh breath has spawned a multibillion-dollar industry in the United States, which offers an impressive lineup of breath aids.

Many of these products do nothing more than give you a false sense of confidence, but mouthwashes and rinses containing antibacterial ingredients have been shown to help control oral bacteria and improve breath odor. A few herbs and nutritional supplements, including magnolia bark extract and xylitol, can help freshen breath naturally.

The results of a study published in the *Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry* revealed that breath mints containing magnolia bark extract killed more than 61 percent of odor-causing oral bacteria. Without the magnolia bark extract, the mints killed only 3.6 percent of the germs.

Mints, gums and mouthwashes containing the natural sweetener xylitol have been shown to reduce tooth decay, gum disease and bad breath by inhibiting the growth of *Streptococcus mutans* and other oral bacteria. Products containing xylitol and magnolia bark extract can be found at most health-food stores.

Saliva is one of the best breath fresheners known, and it's a lot cheaper than a jug of Lavoris. Saliva washes food particles and odor-producing bacteria out of your mouth and into your stomach.

The more saliva you have in your mouth, the less likely you are to have bad breath. Because mild dehydration can reduce saliva production, it's important to drink plenty of water throughout the day.

Certain over-the-counter medications and prescription drugs can rob your mouth of saliva. Antihistamines and decongestants are notorious for leaving you with a parched palate, but dry mouth is listed as a side effect of at least 300 commonly used medications.

Most cases of halitosis are entirely treatable, but you have to recognize the problem first. If you're not sure how your breath ranks, just ask the people closest to you.

Rallie McAllister is a board-certified family physician, speaker and the author of several books, including "Healthy Lunchbox: The Working Mom's Guide to Keeping You and Your Kids Trim."

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