

Controlling bad breath



Bad breath is very common. It can last a short time or can be a chronic problem—lasting for days or months (or even longer). This article talks about some causes of bad breath and offers some tips on controlling it.

WHAT CAUSES BAD BREATH?

Several things can cause bad breath, like conditions in your mouth, illnesses in other parts of your body, medications, or certain foods and drinks.

Conditions in your mouth

Most of the time, chronic bad breath is caused by a problem in your mouth. Some of these conditions are common, such as

- deep cavities;
- dry mouth;
- coating of food and bacteria on the back of the tongue;
- severe gum disease.

Illnesses in other parts of your body

Bad breath can be a sign of illnesses involving other parts of your body. For example, bacteria associated with bad breath can grow in the nose, sinuses, or tonsils when those tissues are swollen, such as when you have an infection or allergic reaction. Sometimes debris can collect and harden in the folds of the tonsils, forming tonsil stones that can cause bad breath. Conditions that affect the digestive system, like gastric reflux or ulcers, also can cause bad breath. Other illnesses that can affect breath odor include diabetes and liver or kidney failure.

Medications

Some people develop bad breath while taking certain medications. Medications that might affect breath odor include acetaminophen and some allergy medicines and chemotherapy treatments.

Certain foods and drinks

Certain foods and drinks can trigger temporary bouts of bad breath. Some of the most well known are garlic, onions, and fish, including tuna. Coffee and alcoholic beverages can dry your mouth, which can also contribute to breath that smells bad.

CONTROLLING BAD BREATH

Since most bad breath starts in the mouth, good oral care is a smart first step to controlling breath odor. To help keep your mouth clean

- brush twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste;
- clean between your teeth daily with floss or another product made for this, like tiny brushes, picks, or water flossers.

Over-the-counter mouthrinse can help freshen breath. Look for products that have the ADA Seal of Acceptance for the relief of bad breath. These products have been demonstrated to meet ADA Seal standards for safety and efficacy.

Pay attention to what you eat and drink. Avoid foods like garlic and onions and limit your consumption of coffee and alcoholic beverages. Drink plenty of water or use sugar-free candies or gum to keep your mouth moist.

Talk to your dentist if you are concerned about your breath. He or she can help keep your mouth clean and healthy, which may solve the problem. If your breath is still a concern, your dentist may suggest that you speak with your physician.

CONCLUSION

A number of things can cause bad breath, including your oral or general health. In many cases, brushing and cleaning between your teeth as recommended can help keep your breath fresh. If this does not help, talk to your dentist about possible causes and options for improving the situation. ■

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adaj.2021.03.009>

Prepared by Anita M. Mark, senior scientific content specialist, ADA Science & Research Institute, Chicago, IL.

Disclosure. Ms. Mark did not report any disclosures.

Copyright © 2021 American Dental Association. Unlike other portions of *JADA*, the print and online versions of this page may be reproduced as a handout for patients without reprint permission from ADA Publishing. Any other use, copying, or distribution of this material, whether in printed or electronic form, including the copying and posting of this material on a Web site, is prohibited without prior written consent of ADA Publishing.

“For the Patient” provides general information on dental treatments. It is designed to prompt discussion between dentist and patient about treatment options and does not substitute for the dentist’s professional assessment based on the individual patient’s needs and desires.

You can find more information for patients at ADAcatalog.org or at MouthHealthy.org.