

The Scary Truth about Bad Breath

What is bad breath?

Also known as Halitosis, oral malodor and fetor oris, bad breath is caused by both physiological (normal body) and pathological (disease causing) states either in the mouth or body. In the past few years, the fear of bad breath has overtaken American society with the help of hundreds of new advertisements for breath mints, candies, gums, mouthwashes and toothpastes. In the past year Americans spent an amazing \$3 Billion on remedies for bad breath. A U.S. phone survey found that 60% of women and 50% of men are concerned about bad breath. There is even a word for the fear bad breath: Halitophobia.

Causes of Bad Breath

In most cases, bad breath originates from dryness in the mouth which fluctuates during the day and night. Because the mouth is dry and inactive during the night, odor is commonly worse when waking up in the morning, resulting in “morning breath”. During the day diet and stress play large roles in degree of mouth odor. Obviously, eating strong flavored foods (garlic, onions, meat, fish and cheese), smoking and drinking alcohol affect breath odor the most.

Normally, bad breath stems from proteins that are trapped in the mouth and then processed by bacteria. There are over 600 types of bacteria in the mouth and of which several dozen can produce bad odors. Most of the bacteria in the mouth is found on the back of the tongue which is typically dry, poorly cleansed and out of the way of normal activity, and the bacteria can live on food remains, dead skin cells and post-nasal drip. When left undisturbed for some time, the bacteria can begin to produce odors resembling dead or dying animal or plant matter. EW!

Other causes of bad breath can be inter-dental (between teeth) or sub-gingival (under the gums) niches, faulty dental work, places where food can deposit, abscesses and unclean dentures. Also, VSCs, or the sulfur compound responsible for bad breath, has been linked to periodontal disease. The higher number of VSCs, the more likely the patient will have periodontal disease. There are some other diseases of the body that can, but very rarely, cause bad breath, such as liver disease, lung infections, diabetes, kidney infections or cancer.

Why Do I have Bad Breath?

It is easy to tell if you have bad breath, but it can be much harder to diagnose the origin of the odor. In order to determine the cause, look to your medical history for respiratory problems, diet history for strong foods, psychological history for anxiety or stress, and personal habits like smoking and alcohol consumption. All of these, as well as decaying or abscessed teeth, gum disease, coated tongue or infected tonsils can cause bad breath.

Treatment for Bad Breath

Treatment depends on the origin of bad breath, ranging from simple oral hygiene education to deep cleaning of the teeth and mouth and the use of antibiotics. The overall purpose of treatment is to create a cleaner and healthier environment in the mouth and body to decrease odor producing bacteria and increase protective bacteria.

To find out more, consult Dr. Dautel or your hygienist at your next appointment.