

Mouth Matters

Dorion on Dentistry

Bad Breath Part 1: The Causes



Bad breath can result from a vast number of causes. While certain foods such as onions and garlic are particularly notorious for limiting ones social appeal for a few hours, chronic bad breath is much more of a concern since it can have a more serious medical or dental cause.

Unfortunately because the nose and mouth are directly connected and since our noses tend to filter out and ignore background odours it's quite possible to be unaware of our own bad breath unless informed by others of the condition. This of course can be a significant source of embarrassment.

There are numerous medical causes of breath odour some of which include stomach problems, sinus infections, kidney or liver failure and diabetes. So if you know (or suspect) you have chronic bad breath it's important to have the cause diagnosed. In the absence of other symptoms of a medical problem the first place to start is with a visit to the dentist to determine if the mouth is the primary source.

The single most common reason for foul breath in most instances is the whitish coating that covers the back of the tongue. It's responsible for about 85 percent of all cases of bad breath. This whitish film is largely composed of the same plaque that's found at or below the gumline on our teeth and it's laden with a type of bacteria known as anaerobes (which means they thrive in environments devoid of oxygen). Anaerobic bacteria produce stinky sulfur containing compounds such as hydrogen sulfide.

In fact the various chemicals produced by these anaerobes

are the same ones we encounter with rotten eggs, corpses, decomposing meat and dead fish — yuk. Fortunately there is constant competition for living space with the hundreds of other less smelly species in the mouth so that unless there's an imbalance, the noxious organisms are too few in number to produce detectable odour.

Besides the tongue, other areas of the mouth can also harbour odour producing bacteria. Certain bacterial species reside in the pockets between the teeth and gums of people with periodontal disease. The odour from these bacteria is so distinctive that a dentist can often correctly anticipate the presence of gum disease even before examining the patient's mouth. The waste products from these organisms not only smell bad, they destroy both bone and connective tissue surrounding your teeth which ultimately can lead to serious infection and tooth loss.

Dentures can also be a source of odour so it's important to regularly disinfect them with commercially available cleansers. It's also advisable to remove them at night because saliva production is reduced when we sleep and the environment becomes ideal for malodorous bacteria to flourish. In fact the drying of the mouth that occurs during sleep with the resultant surge of bacterial activity affects everyone and it's the reason for that nasty phenomenon we call "morning breath".

Next week we will look at several ways to prevent and treat bad breath — so stay tuned because your *Mouth Matters*.

Yours for better dental health,
Rae Dorion, DDS

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