



Guide to bad breath

- ◆ What causes bad breath?
- ◆ How can bad breath be treated?
- ◆ How can I prevent bad breath?

What causes bad breath?

There are many different causes of bad breath (**halitosis**), including poor oral hygiene, oral medical conditions and uncontrolled oral infections like periodontal (gum) disease, medical problems, some drug treatments, smoking, and strongly flavoured food such as onions or garlic (see **Box**).

See your dentist immediately if you have a bad taste in your mouth, or if you find that bad breath persists after use of breath fresheners. Keep a diary of your diet and any drug treatments to help your dentist identify the likely cause of bad breath.

How can bad breath be treated?

Your dentist will (1) perform a full-mouth check-up, (2) examine bad breath, and (3) use information you give on your diet, drugs taken, dry mouth, surgery, or illness, to find out the severity of bad breath and if the cause is oral. He or she may then arrange appropriate treatment and/or advise follow-up, eg:

- Perform or arrange treatment for gums (**periodontal treatment**) and other necessary dental treatment
- Give professional oral hygiene instructions and recommend (1) a special antimicrobial mouthrinse to help fight plaque, or (2) professional teeth cleaning for oral health, as appropriate
- Prescribe artificial saliva for dry mouth, or recommend sugar-free sweets/candy or increased fluid intake
- Give advice and tips on quitting smoking*

How can I prevent bad breath?

Visit your dentist regularly, so that underlying problems that lead to bad breath can be caught and treated early, including periodontal disease and dry mouth. Between dental visits, you can:

- **Avoid strongly flavoured food**, or after such a meal you can chew sugar-free gum, use mouthrinse, or brush your teeth
- **Brush your teeth** with a fluoride toothpaste twice a day and use floss (or an interdental cleaner if advised by your dentist) once a day to clean between teeth; in addition to this routine, you can use a fluoride mouthrinse to help fight plaque; see the Hong Kong Government Tooth Club, <www.toothclub.gov.hk>, for brushing and flossing methods
- **Take out removable dentures at night** and clean them thoroughly before use the next day
- **Brush your tongue** daily for more effective control of bad breath
- Schedule **professional teeth cleaning** regularly
- **Reduce the frequency of snacking**
- ***Give up smoking**; Hong Kong Department of Health Smoking Cessation Hotline: 1833 183; HKU Smoking Reduction Hotline: 2819 2697; HKU Female Smoking Cessation Hotline: 2819 2692; Hong Kong Council on Smoking and Health website: <<http://smokefree.hk>> (Chinese) or <<http://smokefree.hk/en/home>> (English)

Sources: American Dental Association, <www.ada.org>; and Hong Kong Government Tooth Club, <www.toothclub.gov.hk>.

Written by Trevor Lane, DPhil; edited by Li-jian Jin, DDS, PhD. This Patient Page is for general informational use and is not a substitute for diagnosis; for specific advice, please consult a dentist.

Some causes of bad breath

◆ Poor oral hygiene:

Improper cleaning of teeth, gums, and tongue (and any dentures) allows bacteria to rot food remnants.

◆ Oral medical conditions:

- (1) Tooth decay (**dental caries**) smells if it has reached and rotted the tooth's inner tissue (**pulp necrosis**);
- (2) Bacteria sticking to the tooth (in **plaque**) causes gum inflammation and, eventually, disease of the tooth's supporting tissues (**periodontal disease**) where deep pockets trap food and bacteria;
- (3) Saliva naturally cleanses the mouth, but some drugs, prolonged breathing through the mouth, and salivary gland problems can reduce saliva flow and cause dry mouth (**xerostomia**).

◆ Other medical problems:

- (1) Respiratory (nose/throat/lung) infections, sinus infection, nose allergy, bronchitis;
- (2) Digestive problems, diabetes, liver problems, and kidney problems; and
- (3) Nasopharyngeal (nose/throat) or oral cancer.

◆ Smoking:

Smells come from chemicals in tobacco, but smokers also have an increased incidence of periodontal disease and oral cancer.

◆ Food:

- (1) Directly from strong flavours of recently eaten food; or
- (2) Indirectly from chemicals in food that enter the blood circulation, reach the lungs, and get breathed out; the smell will stop when the body eliminates the food.