Dear Alice,

Like many people, I often have an embarrassing bad breath. Listerine and other mouthwashes won’t be of any help for this chronic problem. There are lots of products available to get rid of "volatile sulfur compounds (VSC)" - that supposedly cause this - and I just don't know which one I should try. Also, what’s your opinion on tongue-brushing?

Thanks!

Evil Breath

Answer

Dear Evil Breath,

Almost everyone has cupped a hand over their mouth at some point in time to check whether their breath was fair or foul. When it comes to social situations, it’s normal (and considerate!) to be aware of the way your breath smells to others. Having bad breath can cause embarrassment, particularly when you’re conversing with someone face-to-face. In fact, it’s a common enough concern that it has boosted the business of manufacturers of countless breath freshening products. However, you’re absolutely right to point out that chronic bad breath does not disappear with the use of breath mints, gums, mouthwashes, and the like, because these products only temporarily mask bad breath odors instead of resolving the true cause of the problem. So, instead of popping a mint in your mouth every few minutes, what are the more long-lasting alternatives?

Your solution will depend on the cause of your bad breath. Bad breath can be caused by:

- **Various foods**, such as garlic and onions, whose aromatic substances are absorbed into the bloodstream and exhaled through the lungs as smelly breath odors (so, the odors that can emanate from the stomach via a burp are fleeting and not considered the true source of most bad breath problems). Experiment with avoiding these foods to determine whether they’re the culprits behind your bad breath.
- **Tobacco use** can result in short-term, foul mouth odors. Smoking not only causes your mouth to smell of cigarettes and smoke, but it also can dry out the oral mucosa, causing stinky breath. Your best bet is to quit smoking.
General dental hygiene can determine whether your breath will smell fresh and sweet or offensive and unspeakable. The mouth offers a moist, dark, and warm environment for bacteria to thrive. The presence of these bacteria are the source of the problem for most sufferers of halitosis, because the bacteria react with sulfur-containing proteins in the mouth to help generate the release of volatile sulfur compounds, which are gases that smell like rotten eggs. In addition to brushing and flossing regularly, tongue brushing and scraping can be very effective at removing smelly sulfurous compounds from the mouth. You can find tongue brushes and scrapers at most pharmacies and supermarkets. Follow instructions on tongue brush and scraper packaging to avoid gagging or choking.

Dry mouth (xerostomia) can also contribute to the development of bad breath. Dry mouth is caused by certain medications (i.e., antihistamines, decongestants), breathing predominantly through the mouth, salivary gland problems, or not drinking enough fluids. Various dental conditions, such as advanced periodontal disease, gum disease, and cavities can also cause persistent bad breath. Contact your local dentist for treatment.

Certain medical conditions, such as liver and kidney disorders, diabetes mellitus, postnasal drip, and respiratory and sinus infections can cause bad breath. Make an appointment with a health care provider for personalized medical advice and to discuss any of these health issues.

These tips will likely help you to stop holding your breath and breathe easier. Check out the American Dental Association, Mouth Healthy, and National Institutes of Health websites for even more information and resources.

Be well,

Alice!

Category:
General Health
Body Maintenance
Body Emissions

Related questions

Alcohol in mouthwash ? Does it cause cancer?
Clean mouth = good health?
What should I look for in mouthwash?
Electric vs. manual toothbrushes
Minimizing morning breath
Antiseptic vs. antibacterial mouthwashes

Resources

Medical Services (Morningside)
Tobacco Cessation (Morningside)
Medical Services (CUMC)
Addiction Information & Management Strategies (AIMS) (CUMC)

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