

# Holy Halitosis!



**'TIS THE SEASON  
TO BE WARY — OF  
BAD BREATH,  
THAT IS.**

The holiday social season's here again: time for mingling with the VIPs at the office soiree, making merry with friends, nuzzling under the mistletoe; time for close encounters of the worst kind — with bad breath.

It's awful enough coming from your boss, or the date of your dreams, but what if it's emanating from (oh, horrors!) your own mouth? Luckily, there are a few quick fixes that may work if your bad breath, or halitosis, is mild.

First, have something to eat before you go socializing — surprisingly, hunger can

give your breath a beastly bouquet. But skip the onions and garlic — their volatile odors travel through your bloodstream to emerge from deep in your lungs, where no freshener can hope to reach. Ditto for the telltale aromas from cigarettes and alcoholic beverages.

Once you've eaten, give your mouth and teeth a thorough brushing and flossing to remove remaining bits of food and plaque that can harbor odoriferous bacteria. Says Anne Bosy, supervisor of the bad breath clinic in the faculty of dentistry at the University of Toronto, the older the plaque deposits, the worse the smell, so regular maintenance is recommended. Disclosing tablets, which temporarily tint dental plaque pink so you can find and remove it, can help improve your cleaning technique, but she cautions that they can temporarily stain porcelain caps and tooth-colored fillings. While you're at it, "It's very important to brush the surface of your tongue," she says — its textured surface may be loaded with bacteria.

Mouthwashes and sprays can temporarily freshen you up if you're breathing toxic fumes and there's no toothbrush handy. However, overuse can lead to dry mouth, which only encourages the bacteria to return. Colds, allergies and sinus infections can cause mouth-breathing, which also dries the mucous membranes. And some medications also cause dry mouth as a side effect. For temporary dryness,

Illustration: Gail Gellmer

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sugar-free mints or gums may promote saliva production, which helps keep the little sinkers at bay. While little research has been done on old-time remedies like cloves or fresh parsley, it's thought that chewing them may also stimulate saliva, as well as temporarily mask the smell.

But what if you've tried all this and you're still a major source of air pollution? "It's a good idea to have a proper dental check-up," says Bosy — untreated cavities and periodontal (gum) disease can be particularly pungent. If monster breath still persists, the next stop should be your physician's office, as there are a number of non-dental conditions which can cause bad breath, ranging from digestive problems and respiratory infections, to diabetes or kidney disease.

If your doctor gives you a clean bill of health, and you still have breath that could

wilt a charging buffalo, you may have a condition that Bosy says afflicts about 50 percent of the population at one time or another. Otherwise healthy people with excellent oral hygiene who suffer from bad breath may, in fact, have an unusually stubborn bacterial infection in their mouths which doesn't make them ill, but which definitely puts a dent in their social lives. Unfortunately, these bacteria aren't at all affected by brushing, mints or over-the-counter mouthwashes. So Bosy's clinic has been testing a specially formulated antibacterial mouthwash containing chlorhexidine gluconate, which seems to work for many patients. However, it is only available by prescription from your dentist. In the meantime, try some of the simpler remedies first, and maybe you won't have to hold your breath waiting. ♦

BY MARY LOU KUMAGAI

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WINTER 1992

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