

A breath of fresh air

Now, there's a cure for chronic mouth odor

Having sweet nothings murmured in your ear is seductive, but not if they waft on the breath of death, says 27-year-old speechwriter Darja Ros. "It's the surest way to kiss off a romance. It ranks right up there with perspiration odor as a major turnoff."

Many people think that bad breath is a symptom of poor oral hygiene. As Ros puts it, "I assume that someone hasn't bothered to pick up a toothbrush." But Anne Bosy, a former University of Toronto researcher and partner in Toronto's Fresh Breath Clinic, says research in this area shows that most chronic mouth odors are of a medical rather than cosmetic nature and resist conventional treatments. Finally, there's a cure.

In a recent study, Bosy found some subjects suffered from extreme bad breath even though they were healthy and had no signs

of potential disease or other problems related to bad breath, such as enlarged tonsils, sinusitis or various allergies. The culprit turned out to be a surplus of anaerobic bacteria, which thrive on proteins lurking in plaque, food debris and dead cells and produce two very foul-smelling gases—hydrogen sulfide and methyl mercaptan.

This common condition affects more than 50 percent of the population, says Bosy, and has nothing to do with how often people brush their teeth or gargle with mouthwash. "Some people just have more anaerobic bacteria, although no one knows why," she says. She suspects the problem may be a stress-related decrease in levels of immunoglobulins—a group of antibodies found in the immune system,

which keep bacteria in the saliva on an even keel, among other things.

The only way to deal with chronic bad mouth odor is to locate the source of the bacteria and destroy it, says Bosy. There are countless hot spots in the mouth where bacteria tend to hide out and ordinary mouthwashes can't penetrate. At the Fresh Breath Clinic, Bosy tracks down the offending bacteria with high-tech tools such as a halimeter, a device that measures odors in the subject's airway.

One breeding ground for bacteria is crevices between gums and teeth. Even more inviting is the tongue: bacteria hide in its grooves and fissures and under layers of plaque, emitting potent gases. "We never think to brush the tongue, yet it's one of the most effective ways to combat bad breath," says

Bosy. Daily brushing or scraping the tongue with a scraper cuts down on sulfur compounds for several hours, while brushing teeth alone reduces them for only 15 to 20 minutes.

Bosy's bad-breath regimen also includes rinsing with a special antimicrobial mouthwash containing chlorhexidine, which decreases levels of bacteria in the mouth.

Patients also learn how to protect themselves against reinfection. First, they're given a take-home kit which includes a flexible plastic tongue cleaner and an antimicrobial rinse, along with specialized cleansing techniques to control the growth of odor-producing bacteria. Once the bacteria are under control, patients return to the clinic for other deodorant rinses.

Bosy boasts a 95 percent success rate, with most patients reporting an immediate improvement after the second visit. But while the new treatment cures malodor caused by bacterial infection, it isn't a solution for bad breath stemming from dental-health problems, allergies, sinus infections or ulcers, which requires assessment by a physician or dentist. **ELEANOR JUNGKIND**

Blame stress, not poor brushing.

