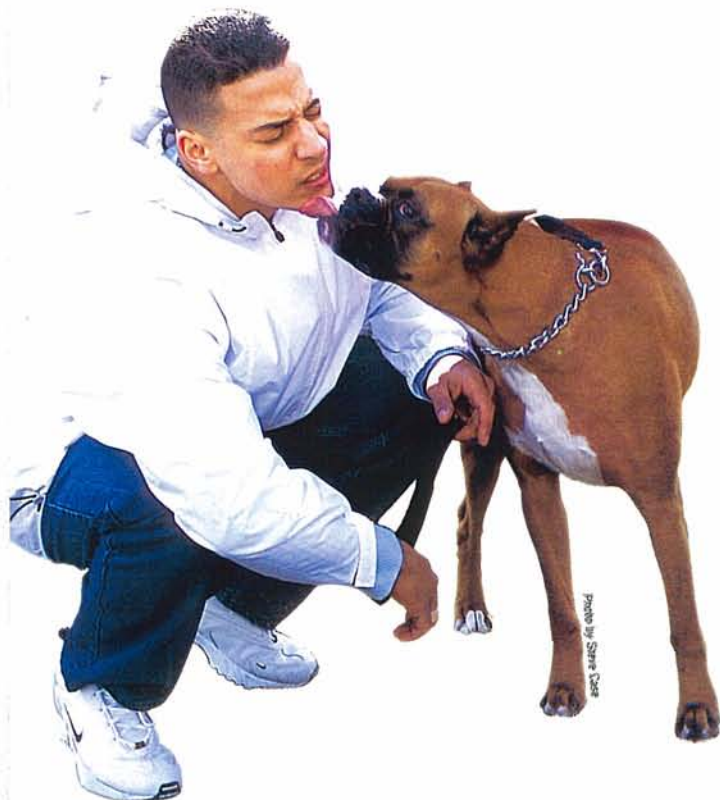


Whew!

Bad breath...

What
your
best friend
won't
tell you!



42 Beautiful Teeth

As I live and breathe. It's literally true: whenever we open our mouths—to speak, to sneeze, and, oh yes, to kiss—every life-sustaining breath we exhale is a little bit of us that gets vaporized and floated out into the air. We all aim for sweet-smelling or at least neutral breath. But who, at one time or another, hasn't experienced rotten-egg, fishy, cheesy, garlicky breath, politely known as oral malodor or halitosis? For those who have it persistently (anywhere from 25 to 65 percent of the population, according to medical studies), it's a definite downer that can impact on their social life, their sex life, and their career. An equal opportunity offender, bad breath shows zero respect for age, gender, ethnicity, or profession. No one is immune or indifferent to it, though many are completely unaware that they've got it; and many others are convinced they have it when they don't. (Halitosis hypochondria is rampant, according to Anne Bosy, MEd, MSc, an oral malodor expert who is clinical director of the Fresh Breath Clinic in Toronto.) But chances are that many of those who are pretty sure they have it, even part-time, will overcome their embarrassment and seek out not just drugstore mouthwashes, but professional help.

Well, here's the good news. After years of hiding in the oral-hygiene closet, halitosis has recently emerged as a frequently discussed dental-office issue. What's more, both dentists and hygienists are getting to be experts at diagnosing and successfully treating even the meanest oral malodor. If they don't mention the subject to you, ask them to check your breath. Many dentists can do it with hand-held breath detectors.

Next step? Treatment, if needed—most likely a prescription, dental-office, or over-the-counter mouthwash; brushing and flossing advice; and/or attention to tooth decay or periodontal care.

Where Bad Breath Comes From

Tooth decay and gums with deep pockets were once considered the major sources of bad breath. But today, the prime breeding ground of oral malodor is believed to be the tongue—in particular, the grooves and fissures at the top of the tongue, as well as the hard-to-reach base of the tongue, that harbor anaerobic bacteria (lacking in oxygen). These bacteria feed on protein matter in the mouth, and it's their byproducts—elevated levels of volatile sulfur compounds—that produce the offending smell, according to Anne Bosy, who is a professor in the Dental Hygiene program at George Brown College in Toronto.

The big question is, how does all this protein matter accumulate in the mouth, particularly in the biofilm (a virtual self-sufficient, eating, and breathing group of different kinds of bacteria living in a commune; otherwise known as plaque) that rests on the surface of the tongue, teeth, and gums? The answer has a lot to do with what we eat and drink, and the way we live. Indulge too much, and you increase your odds of having bad breath.

Here are some of the culprits that create the conditions that lead to oral malodor:

- Protein-rich foods—most notably meat, chicken, fish, and dairy products.
- Cookies, candy, cake, or anything sugary. Sweets offer fuel for bacteria.
- Acidic foods. Watch out for coffee (both caf and decaf), citrus fruits, and certain other fruits such as pineapple and tomatoes. These foods create an ideal environment for bacteria to speed up reproduction (something you want to avoid as much as possible in your mouth).
- Alcohol consumption—which has a drying effect in the mouth, helping those anaerobic bacteria to thrive. Many products, from food to mouthwashes, contain alcohol as an ingredient. Ask your oral care provider

Perform your own personal breath check

Wait an hour after a meal or after you've brushed your teeth. Then give your wrist a hefty lick of your tongue. Now, wait 10 seconds, for the saliva to partially dry. Chances are you'll detect some aroma from the chemicals on your tongue. If it's pleasant, hey, you're ok for now. If not, you've got malodor. Substantial oral malodor will linger on your wrist for several hours, says Anne Bosy.