SYMPTOM

Bad breath

Bad breath is an unpleasant smell from the mouth or exhaled air.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Your breath smells unpleasant or leaves a bad taste

WHERE IT IS FELT
The mouth, tongue, and exhaled breath

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Tongue bacteria, gum disease, dry mouth

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Trouble breathing or swallowing with face or neck swelling

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes after food, or longer until the cause improves

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It continues for weeks despite good mouth care

Overview

Bad breath is an unpleasant smell in the air you breathe out. The medical term is halitosis . It is a symptom, not a disease, and it can have many causes.

Most bad breath begins in the mouth. Bacteria break down food particles, dead cells, and other material, releasing substances with a strong smell. Morning breath, strong-smelling foods, and short periods of dry mouth are common and usually temporary.

Persistent bad breath may be linked to a dental, mouth, nose, throat, or medical condition. It often improves once the cause is found and treated.

What it may feel or look like

You may notice an unpleasant taste, a dry or coated tongue, or an unusual smell on dental floss. Someone close to you may mention the smell.

It can be difficult to judge your own breath accurately. Licking your wrist or breathing into your hand is not a reliable test. If you are concerned, ask someone you trust or speak with a dentist.

Other symptoms can provide clues. These may include:

- Bleeding, sore, or swollen gums
- Toothache or loose teeth
- A dry or sticky mouth
- A white or yellow coating on the tongue
- Mucus dripping down the throat
- Tonsil stones, which are small pale lumps in the tonsils
- Heartburn or an acidic taste

Common causes

Common causes

Bacteria on the tongue and around the teeth are frequent causes. Plaque, a sticky layer of bacteria, can build up if teeth, the tongue, dentures, or spaces between teeth are not cleaned well.

Gum disease can cause persistent bad breath. Early gum disease may cause bleeding or swollen gums. More advanced disease can damage the tissues supporting the teeth.

Dry mouth also allows smells to build up. It commonly happens during sleep, after dehydration, or when breathing through the mouth. Some medicines can reduce saliva. Smoking, vaping, and alcohol may also dry or irritate the mouth.

Foods such as garlic, onions, and some spices can affect the breath until the body removes their odor-producing substances. Crash diets or fasting may produce a different breath smell.

Less common causes

Tooth decay, dental infections, poorly fitting dentures, and trapped food can cause odor. Tonsil stones, ongoing nasal or sinus problems, and mucus draining down the throat are other possibilities.

Acid reflux can sometimes contribute, although persistent bad breath is more often related to the mouth than the stomach.

Some medical conditions can change the smell of the breath, but these are much less common. Bad breath by itself does not usually point to a serious illness.

When to seek medical care

Book a dental appointment if bad breath continues for a few weeks despite regular brushing, tongue cleaning, and cleaning between your teeth. Arrange care sooner if you have toothache, loose teeth, bleeding or swollen gums, mouth sores, or problems with dentures.

See a doctor if a dentist does not find a mouth-related cause, or if you also have ongoing dry mouth, nasal blockage, throat symptoms, reflux, or other unexplained symptoms.

Seek same-day dental or medical care if bad breath occurs with fever, worsening tooth pain, facial swelling, pus, or difficulty opening your mouth. These can be signs of an infection that needs prompt treatment.

Call emergency services if you have trouble breathing, cannot swallow saliva, are drooling, or have rapidly increasing swelling of the mouth, face, or neck. Bad breath alone is not usually an emergency.

How the cause is found

A dentist will usually begin by asking when the smell occurs, how you care for your teeth and dentures, whether your mouth feels dry, and what medicines you take. They may also ask about smoking, diet, nasal symptoms, and reflux.

The dentist may smell the breath and examine your teeth, gums, tongue, saliva, fillings, and dental appliances. They may measure the spaces around your teeth or take dental X-rays if decay or deeper gum disease is suspected.

If your mouth appears healthy, a doctor may examine your nose and throat and review your general health. Tests are not always needed. Any testing will depend on your other symptoms and examination.

If other people and clinicians cannot detect an odor but the concern continues to cause distress, discuss this openly. The concern is real and deserves support, even when no physical source is found.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. Dental cleaning and treatment for gum disease, decay, or infection may be needed. A doctor can review medicines that cause dry mouth, but do not stop a prescribed medicine without advice.

Helpful daily steps include:

Sugar-free gum may help saliva flow if you can use it safely. An antibacterial mouthwash may

reduce odor for a short time, but it does not replace brushing, interdental cleaning, or dental treatment.

Avoid using bleach, household disinfectants, or other harsh products in your mouth. Do not dig into tonsils or gums with sharp objects.

- Brush your teeth and gumline twice a day with fluoride toothpaste
- Clean between your teeth each day with floss or interdental brushes
- Gently clean your tongue, especially toward the back
- Clean dentures as directed and remove them at night
- Drink water regularly if your mouth feels dry
- Attend routine dental check-ups
- Avoid smoking or vaping

What to expect

Morning breath usually improves after drinking, eating, and cleaning your mouth. Odor from food often fades as the food passes through the body.

Bad breath caused by plaque, gum disease, dry mouth, or another condition may continue until that problem improves. Progress may be gradual, especially when gum treatment or changes to daily mouth care are needed.

The symptom can return if the underlying cause returns. Regular dental care and consistent cleaning can help prevent many mouth-related causes.

Common questions

Can bad breath come from the stomach?

It can, but this is less common than a cause in the mouth. Reflux may contribute when you also have heartburn, regurgitation, or an acidic taste.

Why is my breath worse in the morning?

Saliva flow falls during sleep. This allows bacteria and odor-producing substances to build up, especially if you sleep with your mouth open.

Can I have bad breath even if I brush regularly?

Yes. Bacteria may remain on the tongue, between teeth, under the gumline, or on dentures. Dry

mouth and non-dental conditions can also contribute.

Will mouthwash cure it?

Mouthwash may briefly mask or reduce odor. Persistent bad breath usually improves only when the underlying cause is addressed.

Sources

- NHS - Bad breath
- American Dental Association, MouthHealthy - Bad Breath
- National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research - Dry Mouth
- MSD Manual Consumer Version - Bad Breath
- Kapoor U, Sharma G, Juneja M, Nagpal A. Halitosis: Current concepts on etiology, diagnosis and management . European Journal of Dentistry . 2016;10(2):292-300.