SYMPTOM

Bad or changed breath

Bad or changed breath is an unpleasant or unusual smell from the mouth or nose.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Breath smelling unpleasant, unusual, or different from normal

WHERE IT IS FELT
Mouth and nose

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Tongue coating, gum disease, dry mouth

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Facial swelling with fever or severe tooth pain

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

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persists for several weeks despite careful mouth care

Overview

Bad or changed breath means that air leaving your mouth or nose has an unpleasant or unusual smell. The medical term for ongoing bad breath is halitosis .

Most breath odor starts in the mouth. Bacteria break down food particles and cells, especially on the tongue and around the gums. This can release strong-smelling gases. Morning breath and odor after eating certain foods are usually temporary.

It can be difficult to judge your own breath because your nose becomes used to familiar smells. Sometimes another person notices the change first. In other cases, you may sense an unpleasant taste or smell even when others cannot detect it.

Bad breath is a symptom, not a diagnosis. The cause may involve the teeth, gums, tongue, saliva, nose, throat, medicines, or a medical condition.

What it may feel or look like

You may notice:

Breath may be worse after waking, fasting, smoking, drinking alcohol, or eating foods such as

garlic and onions.

An unpleasant taste does not always mean your breath smells. Changes in taste or smell, including after a respiratory infection, can alter how your own breath seems to you.

- A sour, musty, rotten, metallic, fruity, or otherwise unusual smell
- An unpleasant taste that returns after brushing
- A dry or sticky mouth
- A white, yellow, or brown coating on the tongue
- Bleeding, swollen, or tender gums
- Food collecting between teeth or under dental work
- Small white or yellow tonsil stones at the back of the throat

Common causes

Common causes usually come from the mouth. These include a coated tongue, plaque around the teeth, tooth decay, and gum disease. Food trapped between teeth, dentures, braces, or dental work can also contribute.

Dry mouth is another common cause. Saliva helps wash away food and control bacteria. Your mouth may become dry during sleep, when you are dehydrated, or because of certain medicines. Smoking, vaping, alcohol, and breathing mainly through your mouth may make dryness worse.

Strong foods and drinks can cause short-lived changes. Dieting or fasting may also change breath odor as the body begins using more stored fat for energy.

Less common causes include tonsil stones, ongoing sinus or nasal problems, and infections in the mouth or throat. Acid reflux can sometimes contribute, although mouth and dental causes are more common.

Rarely, a distinctive odor may occur with a serious medical problem. Fruity-smelling breath can occur in diabetic ketoacidosis, a dangerous build-up of acids in the blood. Kidney or liver failure may also affect breath, but odor alone cannot identify these conditions.

Sometimes no odor is found during an examination. A changed sense of smell, anxiety about breath, or another smell disorder may be involved. The concern is still worth discussing if it is affecting your daily life.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services now if changed breath occurs with:

These symptoms need urgent assessment. Fruity breath is especially concerning in someone with diabetes or very high blood sugar.

Arrange same-day dental or medical care for facial or jaw swelling with fever, severe tooth pain, pus around a tooth, or difficulty opening your mouth. These can be signs of an infection that is spreading.

Book a routine dental appointment if the odor lasts for several weeks despite regular brushing, tongue cleaning, and cleaning between your teeth. Also arrange an appointment for bleeding gums, loose teeth, ongoing dry mouth, tooth pain, or poorly fitting dentures.

If a dentist does not find a mouth-related cause, make a routine medical appointment. This is particularly useful if you also have ongoing nasal blockage, throat symptoms, reflux symptoms, or a change in your sense of smell.

- Trouble breathing or swallowing
- Drooling or inability to swallow saliva
- Rapidly increasing swelling of the tongue, face, jaw, or neck
- Fruity breath with deep or difficult breathing, vomiting, confusion, or marked drowsiness

How the cause is found

A dentist will usually ask when the change began, whether it comes and goes, and what makes it better or worse. They may ask about mouth care, smoking, diet, medicines, dry mouth, and recent dental treatment.

The examination may include your teeth, gums, tongue, saliva, dentures, and the back of your throat. A dentist may also check for trapped food, tooth decay, gum pockets, or infection.

If the mouth appears healthy, a doctor may examine your nose and throat and review other symptoms. Blood tests, scans, or specialist tests are not routinely needed. They are chosen only when your symptoms suggest a specific medical cause.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the odor. Masking it with mints may help briefly but does not remove an ongoing cause.

Helpful mouth care includes:

Sugar-free gum may increase saliva if your mouth is dry. Mouthwash can reduce odor for a while, but some products may worsen dryness. Follow the label and ask a dentist which type is suitable for you.

Do not scrape the tongue hard or use household chemicals in your mouth. These can damage delicate tissue.

A dentist can treat tooth decay, gum disease, dental infection, or poorly fitting dental work. If a medicine may be causing dry mouth, discuss it with a doctor or pharmacist. Do not stop a prescribed medicine on your own.

- Brush twice daily with fluoride toothpaste
- Clean between your teeth each day
- Gently clean the tongue, especially toward the back
- Clean dentures as directed and remove them at night
- Drink water regularly
- Attend recommended dental check-ups

What to expect

Odor caused by food, sleep, or a dry mouth often improves within hours after eating, drinking, and cleaning your mouth.

Breath linked to plaque, gum disease, tooth decay, or infection usually improves as the condition is treated. It may take repeated dental care and consistent cleaning at home.

Persistent symptoms should be reassessed rather than covered up with breath products. If no odor can be detected, help is still available for changes in smell or ongoing worry about breath.

Common questions

Does bad breath usually come from the stomach?

No. Most ongoing bad breath begins in the mouth, particularly on the tongue or around the gums. Digestive causes are less common.

Why can I not smell my own breath?

Your brain becomes less aware of smells that remain present. A trusted person or dental

professional may give a more reliable assessment than breathing into your hand.

Is mouthwash enough to treat it?

Mouthwash may reduce odor temporarily. It cannot repair tooth decay, remove hardened plaque, or treat an infection. Brushing, cleaning between the teeth, tongue cleaning, and appropriate dental care are more important.

Can medicines change my breath?

Yes. Many medicines reduce saliva, which can lead to dry mouth and stronger odor. A doctor or pharmacist can review this without automatically stopping the medicine.

Sources

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