

Bad breath - An embarrassing problem



Most people may have experienced transient bad breath from time to time.

- ✧ According to Oral Health Survey 2011, three out of every four 35 to 44-year old adults in Hong Kong reported that they had experienced bad breath.
- ✧ According to surveys from other countries, about 10-30% of the population are suffering from persistent bad breath.
- ✧ The other cases may be transient, caused by external factors or psychological factors.

Do I have bad breath?

A) Transient bad breath

- ✧ Saliva secretion is usually reduced during sleep. This may lead to an increase in the bacteria counts in the mouth. Therefore, one may have transient bad breath after sleep. The problem will disappear after toothbrushing.
- ✧ Eating certain foods such as garlic and onion may also cause transient breath odour, but it should not be persistent.

B) Persistent bad breath

- ✧ 90% of the cases originate from oral problems
- ✧ The rest of the cases may be related to many other diseases and illnesses such as medical problems of the digestive or respiratory system. Liver or kidney failure and diabetes may also lead to bad breath.

Bad breath that originates from the mouth

Bacteria such as Fusobacterium, P Intermedia and T Denticola in the oral cavity breakdown proteins into volatile sulphide compounds, which have foul odour and cause bad breath.

Who is prone to bad breath? Where are the likely problems?

Bad breath is caused by bacteria that do not require oxygen for growth. These bacteria tend to harbour in the areas that cannot be reached by tooth brushing.

- Presence of tooth decay

Tooth decay leads to accumulation of dental plaque in the cavity. The tooth decay may spread to the pulp, cause pulp death and emit foul odour.

- Having gum disease

Dental plaque tends to accumulate along the gum margins and interdental spaces. This can cause gingivitis, and eventually lead to recession of the gum tissue. Gum pockets will be formed. More plaque bacteria will accumulate in those areas and cause bad breath.

- Presence of infection

Bad breath may also be the result of dental abscess or infection of the wisdom tooth.

- Wearing unclean dentures

Dentures that are not cleaned properly can also harbor bacteria and food debris that cause bad breath.

- Dry mouth

Dry mouth can be due to the side effects of many types of medications. Persistent dry mouth will reduce the oral cleaning effect of saliva and cause bad breath.

- Smoking

Smoking can cause unpleasant mouth odour as well as dry mouth. Smokers are at greater risk of developing gum disease that can cause bad breath.

- The rough surface of the tongue

It provides a habitat for the bacteria to grow and causes bad breath.

What should I do about bad breath?

A) Bad breath that originates from the mouth

You need to go to your dentist for a thorough dental check-up

- ✧ To determine whether the bad breath is caused by oral diseases such as gum disease, tooth decay or bacterial infection
- ✧ To receive appropriate treatment to prevent the condition from getting worse
- ✧ To get a thorough teeth cleaning. The dentist will also give you oral care advice such as the correct tooth brushing and flossing techniques

B) Bad breath caused by other health conditions

If the dentist has assured that you do not have any oral problem, your bad breath may be caused by other medical conditions. You may visit your family physician to check for medical conditions of other parts of the body such as the ear, nose, throat and the digestive system to find out the cause of bad breath.

Does mouthwash help to eliminate bad breath?

- ✧ Therapeutic mouthwash can temporarily reduce the number of bacteria which cause bad breath.
- ✧ However, if you are suffering from gum disease, mouthrinse cannot remove the bacteria hidden deep in the gum pocket. Therefore, it does not help to eliminate the root cause of bad breath.

Does chewing gum help to eliminate bad breath?

- ✧ Chewing sugarless gum can stimulate the secretion of saliva. This may temporarily help to reduce the number of bacteria.

Bad breath may be a sign of oral diseases. The use of mouthrinse or chewing gum may cover up the odour temporarily, and thus delay the proper treatment of the underlying oral diseases.

What can I do to prevent bad breath?

1) Maintain good oral hygiene

- *Have good oral self-care habit*

- ✧ Brush your teeth with fluoride toothpaste twice a day. Be sure to brush along the

gum margin as well as all tooth surfaces.

- ✧ Floss everyday to clean the adjacent tooth surfaces
- ✧ Gently clean the tongue surface with a tongue scraper or a toothbrush if necessary.

- ***Keep the denture clean***

- ✧ If you wear removable dentures, take them out at night and brush them thoroughly with detergent.
- ✧ Then soak the dentures overnight in a glass of water

2) Pay attention to your diet

- *Avoid foods such as garlic and onion which give out intense smell.*
- *Drink water frequently to keep your mouth moist.*

3) Being health conscious

- *Refrain from smoking/Quit smoking*
- *Maintain a healthy lifestyle*

4) Have regular dental check-up

- *The dentist will carry out professional teeth cleaning for us and will provide appropriate treatment if necessary.*



Oral Health Education Unit
Department of Health