

Bad breath, also called halitosis, is a common condition and sometimes a distressing source of embarrassment. Frequently, people aren't even aware there's a problem. While there are many causes for bad breath, it most commonly results from a lack of good oral hygiene. Daily brushing and flossing and regular dental checkups and cleanings are the best prevention for bad breath.

However, when bad breath persists, despite good oral health, there may be other reasons for mouth odor and a consultation with your CDA member dentist or physician is in order.

The odor may result from the air you exhale.

Aromatic foods, especially garlic and onions, are often the source of breath odor. Food that is absorbed into the bloodstream is transferred to the lungs, where it is expelled, often with the odor still recognizable. Brushing, flossing and mouthwash will only mask the odor temporarily. Odors continue until the body eliminates the food. Additionally, during the digestion process, the odor may make its way back up the esophagus and is expelled during talking and breathing.

Sometimes odors emanating from the lungs or sinuses will contribute to bad breath. A sinus infection, bronchitis, or other respiratory tract infection can sometimes be detected through breath odor. Furthermore, post-nasal drip that collects at the back of the throat can be a source of mouth odor. Gargling mouthwash can help wash away fluids that coat the throat, reducing this effect.

Tobacco use is another common source of mouth odor, as the tobacco smoke is inhaled, so it is exhaled. If you use tobacco products, consult with your dentist for advice and support on how to quit.

A dry mouth may be the culprit.

Good saliva flow cleanses the teeth and tissues, and is essential to keeping the mouth healthy and in balance. A common side effect of many medications is reduced saliva flow, which results in a dry mouth (also called xerostomia) and increased mouth odor. Dry mouth may also be caused by other problems involving the salivary glands or from continuously breathing through the mouth. Several over-the-counter products are available for xerostomia and your CDA member dentist can advise you on the best way to manage this condition.

There are other medical conditions that contribute to mouth odor.

Beyond infections of the sinuses and lungs, there are other medical conditions that can sometimes be detected through mouth odor. These include diabetes, gastrointestinal disturbances and liver or kidney ailments. If your CDA member dentist determines that your mouth is healthy, you may be referred to your family doctor or a specialist to determine the cause of bad breath.

What else can I do?

The best control for mouth odor is good oral hygiene. Mouthwashes and breath sprays are mostly cosmetic and do not have a long-lasting effect. Additionally, breath mints generally contain sugar or citric acid and, when allowed to dissolve slowly in the mouth are decay producing. These products should be used sparingly. If you constantly use one of these products to mask mouth odor, see your CDA member dentist.