

Chronic Bad Breath May Be a Sign of Disease

Chronic bad breath, or halitosis, is not just an embarrassing annoyance. Commonly caused by the presence of oral bacteria, halitosis is a condition that can affect your relationships with family, friends and coworkers. Mints, mouthwashes and gums cannot treat chronic bad breath; they can only temporarily mask the odor.

Through a process called acclimation, your body filters out background smells such as body and breath odor, so you can smell other scents. Acclimation makes possible for a person suffering from halitosis to not even know it. The best way to find out if you have bad breath is to ask a trusted friend or family member to tell you the truth about your breath.

If you want to avoid the embarrassment of having to ask someone, lick your clean wrist, wait a few seconds, and then smell. This quick test will provide you with a general idea of your breath odor. If you think you suffer from chronic bad breath but are not sure of the cause, the American Dental Association recommends that you speak to your dentist at your next check up. He or she can determine if your bad breath is a result of an unhealthy mouth and can provide treatment options.

Often, bad breath is attributable to poor oral hygiene. If you neglect to brush and floss daily, food particles will collect between the teeth, on the tongue and around the gums, turning your mouth into a breeding ground for odor-causing bacteria. Simply brushing and flossing your teeth can significantly reduce the amount of bacteria in your mouth and the odor they produce.

Chronic bad breath is a common symptom of periodontal disease, a bacterial infection of the gums caused by the accumulation of plaque. A sticky colorless film of bacteria, plaque constantly forms on the teeth. If you fail to remove plaque by brushing and flossing your teeth, the bacteria will cause the gum to pull away from the teeth. Over time, gum disease can result in tooth loss.

Bad breath may also be caused by tobacco use, diet and chronic dry mouth, called xerostomia (ZEER-oh-STOH-mee-ah), is a condition where saliva flow decreases. Saliva is the body's natural mouth rinse that washes and dilutes odor-causing bacteria from the mouth. Sometimes bad breath signals the presence of other medical conditions such as respiratory tract infections, chronic sinusitis, postnasal drip, diabetes, gastrointestinal disturbance and liver or kidney ailments.

If your bad breath persists even after your dentist has determined your mouth is healthy, he or she may refer you to your family doctor to determine the cause of your halitosis.