

Bacteria to Blame for Bad Breath

Bad breath is big business, driving millions in annual breath-freshener sales as well as serious scientific study of products with therapeutic potential, such as tongue scrapers and mouth rinses.

But bad breath usually begins with a basic metabolic process – the breakdown of food – and can often be managed with good oral hygiene practices, including daily brushing and flossing.

“When the body breaks down leftover food that collects at the gums or back of the mouth, it releases volatile sulfur compounds and the characteristic bad breath odor,” says Scott Navarro, DDS, a national oral health advisor for Delta Dental Plans Association. “Flossing will help to remove buildup below the gums and between teeth, and brushing all oral surfaces – including tongue, cheeks, and roof of the mouth – removes matter before the metabolic process begins.”

Sometimes brushing the tongue does not sufficiently cut through a coating of bacteria and light scraping is called for. Tongue scrapers are readily available on the market, but an ordinary spoon can be used instead. Drinking water also helps to keep the mouth cleared of food and bacteria.

If basic oral hygiene doesn’t eliminate the odor, then bad breath might be a sign of something else. Bad breath can also result from more serious medical conditions, including liver, intestinal, and kidney problems, as well as diabetes and other chronic conditions. Halitosis is more often caused, however, by postnasal drip.

Halitosis can also be a symptom of oral health issues such as periodontal disease or dry mouth. Bacteria are better able to flourish when they’re not being washed away by saliva, as is the case in “morning breath”, which is caused by a natural decline in saliva production during sleep.

“Everyone has bad breath occasionally, but chronic cases should be discussed with a dentist,” adds Dr. Navarro. “A dentist can confirm whether the source of a problem is in the mouth and help patients develop plans for combating bad breath. If bad breath signifies a systemic problem or more serious oral health issue, dentists can suggest further diagnosis and treatment or refer patients to medical specialists.”