

The Massachusetts Dental Society (MDS) is pleased to make this publication available to our member dentists as a way of communicating important oral health information to their patients.

Information in WORD OF MOUTH articles comes from dental health care professionals of the MDS and other leading professional dental organizations, including the American Dental Association. If you have any questions about specific content that may affect your oral health, please contact your dentist. For more information regarding oral health, please visit the Public Resources section of the MDS website at massdental.org.

Your comments and suggestions regarding WORD OF MOUTH are always welcome. All correspondence may be sent to:

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“Masking”

Since face mask guidance and mandates were implemented last year to help slow the spread of COVID-19 and keep ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities safe, many people have become aware of something that previously eluded them: They have bad breath. And while some may think that wearing a mask causes bad breath, the fact is that if you have bad breath, it already existed. Donning a face mask has just put the stinky news, well, right under your nose.

According to the American Dental Association (ADA), approximately 50% of adults have or have had bad breath (also known as halitosis) at some point in their life, so if you suffer with halitosis, you aren't alone.



Bad Breath



But the good news is that it's not something you have to be stuck with forever; there are treatments you can use to banish bad breath. But before you stock up on breath mints and mouthwash, be aware that these merely cover up the symptom and don't address the cause. That's why it's important to know what's behind your bad breath because you want to be sure it's not something more serious.

The most common cause of bad breath is poor oral hygiene, so you'll want to start there. Any time we eat something, food particles can remain in the mouth and become lodged between teeth, along the gum line, or on the surface of the tongue. When this happens, bacteria that are naturally present in the mouth begin to break down these particles, releasing chemicals with a strong odor. Failure to brush and floss your teeth daily can result in this bacteria being allowed to thrive in your mouth. To prevent this, be sure to brush your teeth at least twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste and floss daily to remove any particles the brush can't reach.

The surface of the tongue is also a major breeding ground for the same bacteria that cause bad breath, so you don't want to ignore it. The easiest way to clean your tongue is simply to brush it when you brush your teeth, and since bad breath odors may stem from the back and sides of the tongue, it's especially important to thoroughly brush those areas. You can also buy a tongue scraper specifically designed for tongue cleaning at your local pharmacy. To use a tongue scraper, just glide it firmly across the top and sides of your tongue.

If you are on top of your tooth game and follow good oral hygiene habits and your bad breath persists, the cause could be one of the following:

DIET

Certain foods, such as garlic and onions, have strong odors that can impact your breath, and when these foods are digested, the odor-causing chemicals can be absorbed into the bloodstream and even move into the lungs, so when you exhale, these chemicals (and odors) are also exhaled. Following a low-carbohydrate/high-protein diet (e.g., keto) may also increase your risk for developing bad breath. When you are on a low-carbohydrate diet, the body modifies the way it deals with fat by producing a chemical substance called ketones, which can give your breath a different, and oftentimes bad, odor.

ORAL CONDITIONS

Bad breath may be a sign that you have an infection in your mouth, which could take the form of an infected tooth (sometimes as the result of a cavity) or periodontal (gum) disease. One of the warning signs of periodontal disease is persistent bad breath. Periodontal disease is caused by plaque that forms on the teeth, which then irritates the gums. This can cause

gum tissues to pull away from the teeth and form pockets where more bacteria can collect and become trapped, leading to worse odors. At times, only a professional periodontal cleaning can remove extensive bacteria and plaque. Make an appointment with your dentist to have them take a closer look to rule out any potential oral causes.

DRY MOUTH

Persistent dry mouth (xerostomia) occurs when saliva flow decreases in the mouth, and that can lead to bad breath because saliva helps clean the mouth, remove odor-causing particles, and neutralize acids produced by plaque. According to the ADA, more than 500 medications can contribute to dry mouth, including antihistamines, blood pressure medications, decongestants, pain medications, diuretics, and antidepressants. Additionally, cancer therapy, the use of recreational or medicinal marijuana, and constantly breathing through the mouth can cause xerostomia.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS

Halitosis may also be the sign of an underlying medical disorder, such as an infection in the respiratory tract (nose, throat, windpipe, or lungs), chronic sinusitis, postnasal drip, chronic bronchitis, diabetes, gastrointestinal disturbance, or even a liver or kidney ailment. If your dentist determines that your teeth and gums are healthy, they may refer you to your primary care physician or a specialist to determine the medical cause of the bad breath.

CONCLUSION

While it's tempting to try to solve your bad breath problem with a quick fix, know that over-the-counter mouthwashes, breath mints, and gum only help fight temporary mouth odor. If you need to frequently use a mouthwash or mints to cover up your bad breath, consult with your dentist, who can determine the source of the problem. Your dentist will be able to rule out any oral cause of the bad breath and recommend or prescribe specific products, medications, or treatments that can help. For example, if your dentist determines that your bad breath is caused by medication-induced dry mouth, they can recommend that you use sugar-free gum or sugar-free candy or lozenges, or even an artificial saliva product to help stimulate saliva flow.

Bad breath is embarrassing and unpleasant, which is why it's so important that you maintain good oral hygiene that will help you steer clear of many dental problems before they occur, and not just try to "mask" the problem.