

7 Fresh Tips to Prevent Bad Breath

By Lisa Collier Cool
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In papyrus scrolls dating back from 1550 BC, Hippocrates, the Greek physician famed as the father of medicine, offered a formula for sweet-smelling breath: rinsing with a mouthwash made of red wine, anise and dill. Toothpaste is even older than that, with an ancient Egyptian medical text called the *Ebers Papyrus* containing recipes dating back some 6,000 years, while toothbrushes to apply it were only invented about 500 years ago, most likely by the Chinese, reports Dr. Harold Katz, director of the California Breath Clinics and author of *The Bad Breath Bible*. Today, 93 million Americans suffer from chronically bad breath (halitosis), which can sometimes signal other health problems. If you or someone you smooch with regularly is one of them, these tactics can help restore fresh breath, according to Margaret Mitchell, DDS and other experts.

- 1. Clean your tongue.** Along with brushing and flossing twice a day, also use a tongue scraper, available at most drugstores, or brush your tongue. “Your tongue, especially the top back, is a serious source of halitosis,” says Dr. Mitchell. That’s because your tongue has millions of filaments that can trap food particles and bacteria, leading to oral odor.
- 2. Chew sugarless gum.** Surprising as it sounds, saliva is the best defense against bad breath. A common cause of halitosis is dry mouth, which can be triggered by certain medications and health problems. If you’re wondering why morning breath can be smelly, that’s because saliva flow is lower during sleep. Chewing gum counteracts these problems by stimulating salivation. What’s more, gum containing the sugar substitute xylitol may help reduce cavity-causing bacteria, a recent [study](#) suggests.
- 3. Scent your breath with cinnamon.** Unlike other flavorings, such as mint, which only mask bad breath, cinnamon appears to have odor-combating compounds, with a [study](#) presented at the annual meeting of International Association for Dental Research reporting that the cinnamon-flavored gum, Big Red, seems to reduce odor-causing bacteria. In the study, people who chewed the gum had a more than 50 percent drop in bacteria levels.
- 4. Keep your mouth moist.** Drinking more water also helps wash away badsmelling bacteria. There’s also research indicating that drinking tea may be helpful, since it contains polypehnoles, a plant chemical that may help curb bacterial growth.
- 5. Pay attention to your diet.** An unfortunate side effect of a low-carb diet, such as the Atkins plan, can be “dragon breath” due to ketosis (the fat-burning state that is one of the goals of this type of diet). The only cure is increasing carbs, though chewing mint leaves or parsley can temporarily mask the problem. Also watch out for other foods that can trigger mouth odor, such as coffee, alcohol, and such obvious culprits as onions and garlic.

6. Choose the right mouthwash. Antibacterial mouthwashes help combat oral infections, thus improving breath. An analysis of five studies involving 293 participants by the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews found that such ingredients as chlorhexidine and cetylpyridinium chloride, chlorine dioxide and zinc are all helpful for reducing mouth odor. However, chlorhexidine mouthwash, available by prescription from dentists, can temporarily stain teeth and your tongue. If your dentist advises it to clear up an oral infection, you may be told to dip a Q-tip into the mouthwash and apply it to the backs of your teeth and gums, or only to the infected area.

7. Rule out medical problems. 90 percent of the time, halitosis is triggered by microbes in the mouth. Common dental causes include cavities, gum disease (which may not cause any obvious symptoms other than bad breath), and faulty tooth restorations that have become a breeding ground for bacteria. However, if you have good oral health—and persistent halitosis—check with your doctor, since such illnesses as respiratory tract infections, diabetes, acid reflux disease, liver disease and even cancer, in rare cases, can also cause mouth odor, cautions Dr. Mitchell. One of the best ways to protect your oral health—and keep your breath fresh—is to avoid tobacco use, which greatly increases risk for gum disease and oral cancer.

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