

Halitosis or bad breath

Halitosis (bad breath) is, in the main, caused by sulphur-producing bacteria that normally live within the surface of the tongue and in the throat. Sometimes, these bacteria start to break down proteins at a very high rate and odorous volatile sulphur compounds (VSC) are released from the back of the tongue and throat. Halitosis is not infectious.

Causes of halitosis

Major causes

The major causes of halitosis are:

- Dry mouth - caused by medicines, alcohol, stress or a medical condition.
- Foods high in protein, sugar or acid.
- Smoking - which starves the mouth of oxygen.
- Dental factors - such as periodontitis (infection around the teeth) or poor oral hygiene.
- Nasal and sinus infections.

Less common causes

Less common causes of halitosis include:

- Acid and bile reflux from the stomach.
- Post nasal discharge - for example, due to chronic sinusitis.
- Hormonal factors - such as menstrual cycle or pregnancy.
- Foods - such as onions, garlic or cauliflower, which induce certain odours. However, these effects are only short lived.

Symptoms

The features of halitosis can include:

- A white coating on the tongue
- Dry mouth and teeth
- Post nasal drip, or mucous
- Morning bad breath and a burning tongue
- Thick saliva and a constant need to clear your throat
- Constant sour, bitter metallic taste.

Having halitosis can have a major impact on a person. Because of bad breath, other people may back away or turn their heads. This can cause a loss of confidence and self-esteem.

Treating halitosis

There is no one treatment for halitosis. The treatment will depend on what is causing the problem. Good oral hygiene, including brushing and flossing, is important. Some mouthwashes and toothpastes are effective in fighting halitosis. People with chronic sinusitis may find the regular use of a saline nasal spray helpful. A course of an antibiotic, effective against anaerobic bacteria (such as metronidazole, to reduce the overgrowth of sulphur-producing bacteria), may also help. Speak to your dentist, doctor or chemist to identify the cause of your halitosis and to find the most effective treatment for you.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Dentist
- Your local chemist.

Things to remember

- Halitosis is caused by sulphur-producing bacteria in the tongue and throat.
- The major causes include a dry mouth caused by certain foods, smoking, poor oral hygiene and hormonal factors.
- The treatment of halitosis will depend on the underlying cause.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

North East Valley Division of General Practice

Copyright © 1999/2009 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.