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Heart to Heart

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Bad Breath: Is There A Cure?

(Part One of Two)

Bad breath, medically termed Halitosis, has plagued man since time immemorial. As man developed into a more civilized and social being, he became more conscious about his place in society, manners, looks and even smell.

Statistics in the United States say that about 40 million of its population have bad breath. In the Philippines, as in other regions in Asia, the incidence, conservatively speaking, could be higher than 50%-60%. This guesstimate varies in different subgroups in the community.

What are the causes of halitosis?

The causes of halitosis have baffled even those experts in the art of dentistry for centuries. There are a variety of causes of bad breath. Eating food that causes foul breath, poor dental hygiene, decayed tooth or infection of the gums or oral cavity, and to a lesser extent, diseases like infected tonsils, diabetes, esophageal diverticulum, esophageal reflux, sinusitis, emphysema, etc. But the commonest underlying cause is poor dental hygiene where care of the teeth and the mouth, in general, is neglected.

One of the latest discoveries in dentistry condemns the tongue as one of the most common culprits that harbor bad breath. The papillae of the tongue are tiny hair-like furry structures that have the surface of the taste buds at their tips. Down below the shafts of these papillae, at their base, is the area where the anaerobic sulfur-producing bacteria abound and multiply. These organisms are responsible for “manufacturing” the Volatile Sulfur Compounds (VSCs) which smell like decaying meat or rotten eggs. VSCs are a leading cause of bad breath.

What are the types of bad breath?

Transitory Halitosis is caused by eating food like onions, garlic, durian (the yummy but bad smelling fruit), bagoong (anchovies), patis (fish sauce), etc., and this generally lasts from one day to day and a half. Some people develop halitosis after drinking pop or eating sweets, like dessert. The individual “oral metabolism” varies. The other form of bad breath is the **Chronic Halitosis**, which does not diminish or improve with time, unless treated. It persists until the cause is abolished.

Do people know they have bad breath?

It is odd but most people with chronic halitosis are not even aware they have it. Their own sense of smell is so conditioned to the bad breath in their mouth to the point that they do not even perceive or know they have halitosis. And their friends and relatives (including most spouse) usually do not even tell them, “to spare” them from the embarrassment (which actually leads to a vicious cycle of more embarrassment because of the persistence of this very offensive problem. Ask your friend to be candid with you. This honesty could save your reputation, in some cases, career, and/or love-life, etc., forever.

How to self test for halitosis?

One of the ways to find out for yourself if you have bad breath (if nobody else has clued you in as yet) is to lick the back of your hand, and smell it. Since the tongue (the reservoir of anaerobic sulfur-producing bacteria) is the most likely culprit, this self-test is very helpful. But the best test is, obviously, asking a confidant friend or spouse to smell your breath. Breathing against the mirror, a wall, or any surface and trying to smell your breath yourself is not dependable.

Next Monday: More on halitosis and the new exciting remedy.