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Heart to Heart

With Philip S. Chua, M.D.

Bad Breath: Is There A Cure?

(Part Two of Two)

In our column last Monday, we discussed the various causes of halitosis (bad breath), zooming in on the most common, though not well-known, sources of the offensive odor: the tongue, besides the teeth, the gums, and to some extent, the throat and/or the tonsils.

What causes the rotten egg smell?

The rotten egg or decaying meat smell in the breath, brought on by neglected or poor dental and oral care, is caused by hydrogen sulfide, methyl mercaptan and other volatile sulfur compounds (VSCs) produced by anaerobic bacteria, mostly thriving at the (airless) base of the papillae of the tongue, from front to back, in between the teeth, and in the crevices missed by the toothbrush and dental floss.

What factors lead to halitosis?

The main one is poor dental hygiene and oral (tongue) care. The other factors include: thick saliva and dry mouth (from inadequate fluid intake), excess mucus (food for bacteria) in the throat, hormonal changes in women, some medications (for blood pressure pills, decongestants, antihistamines, tetracyclines, sulfas, or anti-depressants, etc), smoking, alcohol (in drinks or in mouthwashes), any gum, sinus or tonsil infection, diet high in proteins (red meat, eggs, dairy products, etc), or even ketosis (especially when fasting where the body breaks down stored fats to produce energy).

How does dry mouth cause bad breath?

Dry mouth (especially among snorers) leads to sour-metallic taste in the mouth, where the saliva becomes thicker, with severely diminished oxygen content, causing what we call an anaerobic (no oxygen) environment. This makes the milieu favorable for anaerobic bacteria to thrive and produce VSCs (Volatile Sulfur Compounds), the substances that smell like decaying meat or rotten eggs. Drinking 8-10 glasses of water a day, and a glass before bedtime, will help a lot.

Is drinking milk before bedtime a good practice?

The preference is a personal one and should be followed by tooth-brushing before going to sleep. Except for plain water, nothing else should be taken after one brushes/flosses the teeth and scrapes the tongue, before going to bed. Any residual food particles from left in the mouth will “rot” overnight and cause bad breath. Sweets, pop drinks are not only bad for our teeth but aggravate bad breath day or night.

What is the treatment for Halitosis?

A visit to the dentist at least every six months, for “preventive maintenance” and cleaning, is vital. Brushing, flossing, and using a tongue scraper after each meal eliminate a lot of the foul-smelling VSCs. Tongue scraping is a MUST. Chewing sugarless gum helps hydrate the mouth, but it is not the solution. Toothpicks are bad for our gums and teeth. Using an effective mouth wash is very important.

Today, there are 3 or 4 truly proven-effective “anti-VSC” mouth rinses, sprays, and toothpastes. These do not contain alcohol or zinc. Using them 3 times or more a day kills the harmful anaerobic bacteria that irritate the gums and teeth besides causing halitosis. Unlike the common mouth washes that mask or cover up the bad breath temporarily or not at all, these “anti-VSC” mouth rinses neutralize the effects of the odor-causing Volatile Sulfur Compounds and, thus, eliminate halitosis, almost instantly, after gargling for a minute or two. These “new” mouthwashes are, indeed, one of the wonders in oral care today, when used in conjunction with good regular oral-dental hygiene.

Please add the usual footnotes