

# Bad Breath

Dr. Lee Sheldon

We spend lots of money on products to cover up mouth odor. And whether we're using gum, mints, sprays, or mouthwashes, we are for the most part covering up the cause of halitosis. So let's get to the cause and see if we can make some sense out of this.

What's the main cause of mouth odor? Pure and simple, it is dental disease. Many have the false impression that mouth bacteria are all the same. But of course, that's not true. People with dental disease, and particularly periodontal disease, have different bacteria that cause the bone loss and bleeding associated with the disease. Some people have stinkier bad breath than others, because some types of bacteria smell more than others.

Periodontal disease for the most part can be treated. The question is what treatment is necessary to rid the mouth of bad breath. A thorough periodontal examination is the first requirement, along with appropriate dental x-rays. Periodontal pockets may be identified. But the pockets are not the *cause* of the disease, they are the *result* of the disease. The bacteria and your body's response to the bacteria is the culprit.

We can't identify microscopic bacteria with a clinical examination. Years ago, we tried to culture the bacteria, and had variable results. One reason for that was that we would take the bacteria from the mouth, but by the time the bacteria was received by a laboratory that knows how to look for dental bacteria, much of the bacteria would be altered or dead.

Enter the modern age of periodontal diagnosis. Bacteria have their own unique DNA. The DNA doesn't change whether the bacteria are alive or dead. By merely spitting into a cup and sending that out to a specialized lab that identifies the DNA from oral bacteria, both the type and quantity of your bacteria can be identified. Once we know which bacteria you have, we then can use an antibiotic, if necessary, to help in the elimination of that bacteria. If you happen to have one of the smelly types of bacteria, antibiotic treatment in addition to traditional periodontal treatment, can make a nearly instant improvement in your breath.

I won't bore you with the things that you already know you should do and can do better, brushing and flossing. The information that you may not have however is that your tooth surface area is greater in the area between the teeth than on the lip and tongue side of your teeth. So if you're using only a brush, you're getting less than half of the plaque out. The dental hygiene manufacturers have been really good in developing products that help us clean between our teeth better. Those little plastic flossers work better for people who don't have a lot of gum recession. For those who have a lot of gum recession, especially between the teeth, the brushes that go between the teeth may be a better choice. The reason for that is simply that the roots of the teeth are irregular, and a bristle brush is more likely to get into those nooks and crannies.

The tongue itself holds bacteria and food residue. Many people benefit from using tongue cleaners with which you scrape the top of the tongue. What I've found however is that mouth odor from the tongue often originates in the back of the tongue, where the tongue cleaner never reaches. A few drops of a chlorine dioxide mouthwash, such as Clo-Sys, on the back of the tongue can go a long way toward solving the problem.

Could bad breath be caused by something else? Sure. We all know about onion and garlic breath, some of the components of which get right into our blood stream and bathe our lungs and skin in that odor. Could it be a stomach problem or respiratory infection? Sure. But the most likely cause of mouth odor is the mouth. And with a good dental and periodontal examination, and using some of the newer diagnostic and treatment tools, you could be well on your way to solving the problem.

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