



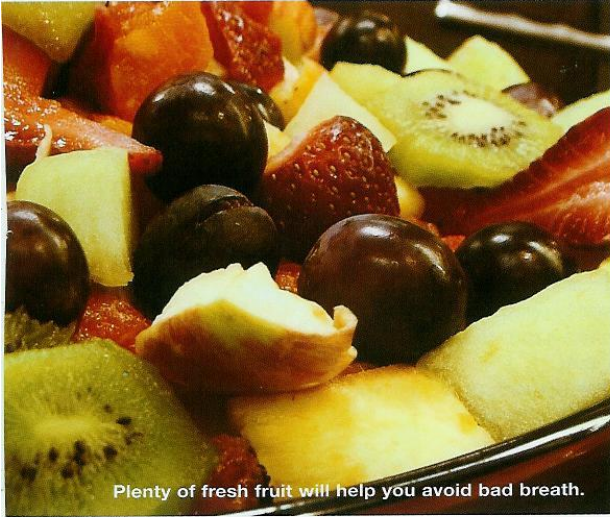
# The breath of life

When you open your mouth, does it smell like something died in there? Would your breath stop a herd of stampeding elephants? Don't worry, there's stuff you can do to fix it. By Alethea Mouhtouris

**B**ad breath—no one wants it, but chances are everyone has had it at some stage. Not even celebrities are immune—stars such as Hugh Grant, Ben Affleck and Clark Gable have reportedly wowed their co-stars for all the wrong reasons!

Not only is bad breath unpleasant, it can hide an underlying medical problem, and can also play havoc with personality and self-confidence. The fear of having bad breath can be paralyzing. Ever bolted to the shop before an important interview/meeting/date to buy breath fresheners or gum? Or sat there thinking, 'does my breath smell?' instead of focusing on a conversation?

The personal care section in the supermarket contains a growing number of breath-freshening products such as powerful mouthwashes, ever-stronger chewing gum, gel strips that dissolve in the mouth, and most recently, disposable finger sheaths that can be used to brush your teeth. But the best way to attack the problem is to attack the cause.



Plenty of fresh fruit will help you avoid bad breath.

### Smelling freeesh!

- Brush your teeth thoroughly twice a day and floss daily
- Clean your tongue using your toothbrush or a tongue scraper
- Monitor your diet, especially protein and dairy product intake, and eat plenty of vegetables and fresh fruit
- Drink lots of water and keep coffee and alcohol to a minimum
- Chew natural breath neutralisers such as parsley and sage
- Avoid excessive grazing during the day—consider munching on celery sticks which come with the added bonus of fibre!
- Seek medical or dental advice if you believe you are experiencing persistent bad breath
- See your dentist regularly
- Replace your toothbrush regularly

Bad breath occurs when bacteria break down proteins in the mouth to form sulphur compounds. Those compounds initially dissolve in the saliva, resulting in a bad or sour taste. When the saliva is saturated with these sulphur compounds, or you get a dry mouth, the compounds evaporate into the air, waft out of your mouth.... and voila! Bad breath.

Sydney dentist Dr Geoffrey Speiser runs the Australian Bad Breath Clinic, and while he still practices dentistry, he sees three times as many patients for bad breath treatment. He believes everyone has some form of bad breath, although not necessarily chronic or highly offensive.

"I think it's an epidemic. Because it has a social stigma, people won't tell you about it and because there's no education process about it people don't know that they have it or they just walk around with it," says Speiser.

"Bad breath has a smell to it that people recognise. Burps smell different, garlic smells different—bad breath is a specific odour smell. It's a fallacy that the bad breath comes from the stomach or the bowels. It's really just an overgrowth of bacteria in the mouth and the throat, and sometimes the nasal passages."

Some people get bad breath sporadically and then their body balances out, and others have chronic bad breath, or halitosis, all the time, due to a chronic illness such as post-nasal drip or they're on medications which give them dry mouth. It's not a result of bad hygiene, he stressed.

Food intake is a problem only to the extent that it provides the protein sources. So diets that are heavily based on protein (including Atkins, often hyped by celebrities) can result in bad breath.

"One of the things about Atkins is that bad breath

is a definite side effect. Their bad breath is slightly different as well because they work along the lines that lack of carbohydrates causes breakdown of body fat and breakdown of body fat results in ketosis, which releases ketones and these have a smell as well," says Speiser.

Symptoms include a bad or sour taste, and a coating on the tongue. Trigger factors include post nasal drip, antibiotics and stress.

**"Bad breath is an anti-social condition so, because there are no specific tests you can do, it plays a lot on your personality."**

*Dr Geoffrey Speiser, the Australian Bad Breath Clinic*

You can test yourself for bad breath—a well-known test is to lick your hand, let the saliva dry and sniff it. But Speiser says it was a very subjective, indecisive test because you were also smelling skin odours.

He says one of the easiest tests was to take a (clean!) hankie or spoon, scrape it down the tongue and smell the coating. "Basically, if it smells, then that's what people are smelling," he says.

"We have a machine that measures sulphur compounds in the mouth and you have to have a reading of below 150 to not be offensive. I believe that the majority of people would read about 200 to 220... which is enough to smell them if you were standing

right next to them."

Fortunately, he says, very few people returned really high readings.

"We actually want to take our measuring machine up to the train station and start picking on the morning crowds to see what situations they have, and I think it's at epidemic proportions. It's a lifestyle problem and it's only going to get worse."

He'd like to return at the end of the day (not necessarily to catch the same people) to see if people had a worse reading than those in the morning, because of

the dry mouth, foods and lifestyle situations such as alcohol at lunch.

Speiser worked with a New Zealand specialist to develop a probiotic treatment and has developed the Breeze product range, which includes a tongue cleaning system with a gel and tongue cleaner. He also educates his patients about lifestyle.

"The more protein you're feeding into the mouth, the more the bacteria have to live on. So we try to get people away from dairy products, yoghurts, cheeses and those sorts of things, and more to carbohydrates," he says.

"Bad breath is an anti-social condition so, because there are no specific tests you can do, it plays a lot on your personality. The person who is anxious about it becomes extremely antisocial... retreating out of society, more into computers, chat rooms on the internet where they can feel comfortable. Those are the people who are seeking us out.

"In general those people who come to us still only blow about 250, 280 into the machine so it's still only 50 per cent above what it should be, which would be offensive but not horrendously offensive."

He cites one of his success stories as a consultant who blew 1500—"that means when he left the room you could still smell him for five minutes afterwards"—but a week later after taking the dentist's advice, he blew a more acceptable 135.

Education is a key part of Australia's national oral health plan 2004–2013, which calls for greater promotion of oral health. The plan states: "The impact of oral disease on people's every day lives is subtle and pervasive, influencing eating, sleep, work and social roles. The prevalence and recurrences of these impacts constitutes a silent epidemic." ▶

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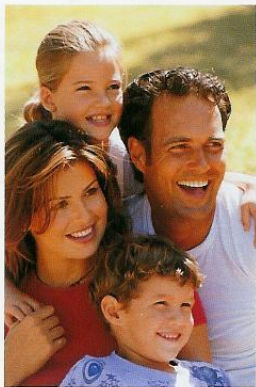
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\*Glasgow Dental Hospital and School. Abstract BSDR meeting, Leeds, April 1999.

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Professor of Dental Science at the University of Queensland, Laurie Walsh, says for patients with persistent bad breath, dental pathology—untreated periodontal disease and heavy deposits on the tongue surface—is the most common contributor, followed by patients who experience a drier mouth than usual.

Walsh says toothpastes and mouth rinses work by reducing the odour making compounds, physically removing the bacteria or reacting chemically with the bacteria.

Research shows brushing with toothpaste significantly reduced bacteria for two to four hours, while some mouth rinses could work for up to 12 hours, he says, adding there is additional evidence for the effectiveness of mouth rinses containing essential oils.

Jill Taylor is the professional relationship manager in oral care for pharmaceutical company Pfizer Australia, producer of the antimicrobial mouth rinse Listerine (which carries the American Dental Association's Seal of Acceptance), Listermint and Listerine PocketPaks.

Taylor, who speaks at dental schools throughout Australia, says Listerine is made up of essential oils such as eucalyptus and menthol, which are dissolved in pharmaceutical grade alcohol to make molecules small enough to slip into hard-to-reach places, such as the filaments in the tongue and between teeth.

She says there has been a marked increase in breath freshener products simply because social awareness was increasing. "It's partly because people are becoming a lot more aware of bad breath, but also because people tend to be grazing more during the day and so a lot of food gets stuck in their teeth."

Dr Andrew Boorer, who runs InDental in Brisbane, says it is important to seek medical advice to identify any underlying problems such as diabetes or lung disease. Dental conditions include gingivitis, or gum disease, leaking amalgams and decayed teeth.

"Sometimes people can have these conditions and not be aware. So it's important to get checked out."

And, as many a parent would know, children can also experience bad breath, particularly when they are teething or sick.

"The mouth has a lot of bacteria at a time when the immune system is down; it's a time when the anaerobic bacteria can take over. When kids get a cold their nose can block quite easily and when that happens they get dry mouth and the bad breath can be there," says Boorer.

"Also, a lot of older people suffer from dry mouth from the medication they're on. When you brush your teeth you're moving bacteria from your mouth, so if you have really good oral hygiene, brushing and flossing, you're keeping levels of bacteria down."

The message is clear... keep your tongue clean, and your teeth even cleaner! ■



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Dr Andrew Boorer, InDental, Brisbane