

Did you know?



SADA
THE SOUTH AFRICAN
DENTAL ASSOCIATION

What your breath says about your health

Everyone experiences bad breath (halitosis) occasionally, especially after eating foods like garlic or onions, or when waking up in the morning. However, if unpleasant breath is persistent, it may signal something more than just food or temporary dryness.

Chronic bad breath often indicates an underlying oral health problem or even a medical condition elsewhere in the body. Understanding the cause is the first step toward finding an effective solution.

The Most Common Causes of Bad Breath

1. **Poor oral hygiene:** When food particles are left in the mouth, bacteria break them down and release unpleasant odours. Plaque build-up along the gumline and between teeth is the most common source of persistent bad breath.
2. **Gum disease (periodontal disease):** Bacteria trapped below the gumline cause inflammation, infection, and foul-smelling compounds. This type of bad breath doesn't go away with regular brushing alone and requires professional treatment.
3. **Dry mouth (xerostomia):** Saliva plays a vital role in washing away food debris and neutralising acids. A lack of saliva - often caused by dehydration, certain medications, or mouth breathing - allows bacteria to thrive, producing unpleasant odours.
4. **Tongue coating:** The tongue's surface can harbour bacteria, especially toward the back. Without cleaning the tongue daily, these bacteria produce sulphur compounds responsible for "morning breath" or chronic odour.
5. **Diet and lifestyle factors:** Tobacco use, alcohol, coffee, and strong-smelling foods can all contribute to bad breath. Smoking also increases the risk of gum disease and dry mouth, compounding the problem.
6. **Medical conditions:** Sometimes, bad breath originates outside the mouth, from sinus infections, tonsillitis, acid reflux, diabetes, or even certain metabolic disorders. In such cases, a dental visit can help rule out oral causes and refer you to the appropriate healthcare provider.

How to Keep Your Breath Fresh

Good oral hygiene remains the cornerstone of preventing and treating bad breath. Here's what you can do:

- **Brush your teeth twice a day** using fluoride toothpaste to remove food and plaque.
- **Floss daily** to clean between teeth and under the gumline.
- **Clean your tongue** with a scraper or toothbrush to remove bacteria.
- **Rinse with water or an antibacterial mouthwash** after meals to reduce bacterial growth.
- **Stay hydrated** - drinking water stimulates saliva and naturally freshens your mouth.
- **Avoid tobacco and limit alcohol**, both of which dry the mouth and cause odours.

If bad breath persists despite good home care, schedule an appointment with your **dentist or oral hygienist**. They can identify whether gum disease, decay, or another condition is the cause and provide targeted treatment.

When to See a Professional

Persistent bad breath should never be ignored. It may be a symptom of:

- **Gum disease**, requiring deep cleaning and professional care
- **Tooth decay**, abscesses, or oral infections
- **Salivary gland issues**
- **Systemic health problems**, such as sinusitis or gastrointestinal disorders.

Your dentist can perform a thorough examination, measure breath odour levels if needed, and recommend the appropriate treatment or referral.

Learn more about the link between oral and general health on the [SADA website](http://www.sada.co.za) at www.sada.co.za and [find a registered dentist near you](#).

Information supplied by The South African Dental Association

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