

FRESH IDEAS FOR SWEETER BREATH

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From mouth strips to sprigs of parsley, preventives are plentiful

By Peggy O'Farrell
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The scene is set for a romantic evening: The candles are lit, the fire is roaring. You lean in gently for that first kiss and encounter a stench that could stop a charging rhino in its tracks. Maybe it's time to trade the split of champagne for a bottle of Listerine.

"Nothing can put a damper on a romantic Valentine's Day like bad breath," says Dr. Barry Gibberman, a Montgomery dentist.

Luckily, there's a slew of remedies from little melt-in-your mouth strips to old standbys like chewing gum and mints to make sure your breath (or your date's) won't qualify as a weapon of mass destruction where your love life is concerned.

Breath strips

Breath strips like Listerine PocketPaks are the newest weapon in the \$3.7 billion fight against halitosis. Listerine, probably tired of seeing its venerable but pucker-producing mouthwash being outsold by candied hybrids like Altoids, introduced its breath strips in 2002.

The thin strips look like bits of cellophane; they melt in your mouth and deliver a temporary blast of breath-freshening mint, cinnamon, menthol and other scents.

For now at least, the strip rules among breath fresheners, says Don Montuori, editor at Packaged Facts, which publishes syndicated market research.

"They're fun. They're weird," Montuori says. "You see it and think, why would I put a piece of meltable plastic in my mouth, and then you do and it's a fun sensation."

Mints for the mouth

Breath mints made up nearly 82 percent of the breath fresheners Americans used in 2001, according to a market report from MarketResearch.com, which is based in Rockville, Md. And leading the pack was Tic Tac, favored in 21 percent of American households. Altoids came in second.

With breath strips now available, mints' new niche lies in strong (curiously strong, as the Altoids slogan goes) flavors. Altoids recently introduced a ginger-flavored mint to go along with the peppermint, wintergreen, spearmint and cinnamon they offer.

A new entry in the mint market is **Momints**, a liquid mint free of calories and carbs that seems to be supplanting Altoids as the "It" breath freshener.

"The era of the Altoids has sort of passed us by," Montuori says. "They still have a dedicated core of followers, no question. But the thing that will keep Altoids and other candied forms of mints with the stronger flavors going is the idea of pushing the edge "

Gums and more

If breath strips are too high-tech and mints too much like candy, there are plenty of other remedies.

Old standbys such as Trident and Dentyne gums, mouthwashes such as Scope and Listerine and sprays such as Binaca help neutralize mouth odor.

Gum, mints and breath strips work fine for temporary, short-term bad breath, the kind you get when you overdose on garlic at lunch, Gibberman says.

"That's pretty easy to take care of. You can brush your teeth, use a mint or some mouthwash and you're fine," he says.

People with chronic bad breath need to go after the source - usually bacteria built up in the mouth. Mouthwashes such as Listerine and BreathRx, available in dentists' offices, actually kill the bad-guy bacteria, Gibberman says. Many mint-flavored mouthwashes just cover up the odor, and will eventually wear off.

"I'm a fan of Listerine," he says. "It tastes lousy, but it works."

Other mouthwashes and rinses, such as Thera Breath Oral Rinse, available in many drug stores, neutralize the sulfur compounds that oral bacteria create.

Chronic problem remedies

People with chronic bad breath should avoid mouthwashes, mints and other remedies that contain alcohol, which can dry the mouth out and make bacteria buildup worse, Gibberman says. Some prescription and over-the-counter medications also dry the mouth.

Brushing and flossing can get rid of a lot of the food and bacteria that can cause bad breath. Using a tongue cleaner - sort of a small plastic squeegee available at most drugstores - daily to scrape bacteria and food off the tongue can cut down on mouth odor.

Seeing your dentist regularly can also send your friend Hali Tosis packing: Many people with chronic bad breath also have tooth decay or gum disease. Get rid of it and much of the odor goes away too. Thera Breath, ProFresh and other companies make entire mouth-cleaning systems designed to eliminate bad breath. Thera Breath's line includes tooth gel, drops, spray, gum and sinus drops.

The natural way

Consumers who prefer the natural route can find a garden full of herbs and plants that help kill bad breath.

The list includes cardamom, eucalyptus, parsley, anise, coriander, dill, peppermint, sage, wild bergamot and clove.

Parsley, often offered as a garnish at restaurants, is especially well-known for its breath-freshening properties. Chewing a sprig between courses can almost make chowing down on garlic forgivable. Watercress also works.

Self-tests for breath

Sometimes you just have a sneaking suspicion something's wrong, especially if friends and loved ones stand across the room when you start talking or always seem to be offering you an Altoid. Dr. Harold Katz, founder of the Los Angeles-based California Breath Clinics, offers these tips for finding out if you have bad breath:

Wipe a piece of cotton gauze across the top of your tongue, then smell it. If it stinks - and especially if there's a yellowish coating on the gauze - your breath stinks, too.

Lick the back of your hand, and let it dry for 10 seconds or so. Then check the smell. Running a piece of dental floss along your back teeth and then sniffing the floss also works.

Ask someone you trust. It's direct, it's honest and it saves them the trouble of figuring out how to break the bad news.

Food, decay can turn breath sour

By Peggy O'Farrell

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Dentists get to know a lot about bad breath.

Dr. Barry Gibberman, a Montgomery dentist, calls halitosis "an occupational hazard."
"We're on the receiving end," he says.

Food, bacteria, and tooth and gum decay are among the usual suspects for bad breath. Short-term bad breath usually comes from "eating smelly food: Garlic, onions or an overdose of Skittles. That's pretty easily corrected," Gibberman says. Brush your teeth, pop an Altoid or chew some gum, and the odor will probably go away.

Bacteria on the teeth, tongue and gums are usually the cause for chronic bad breath. As bacteria multiply in the mouth, they produce volatile sulfur compounds, the source of the classic "rotten egg" smell associated with halitosis.

People whose mouths are chronically dry are more likely to have bad breath because there's not enough saliva to wash away the stink-producing bacteria.

That thick coating of white goo - actually the residue left by a buildup of bacteria combined with dry mouth - is also the culprit for "morning mouth."

Gum and tooth decay also cause a hefty percentage of halitosis, Gibberman says. Getting rid of the decay usually gets rid of most of the offensive odor, he says. That usually means a trip to the dentist's chair instead of the corner drugstore for a pack of gum.

Bad breath can also be a warning sign of chronic sinus infection and some more serious diseases, including diabetes, cirrhosis of the liver, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) and kidney failure.

Halitosis has been around awhile

Bad breath probably wasn't as high on the list of early man's priorities as, say, food, shelter and not getting eaten, but we're willing to bet that more than one clan gathered around the fire to debate how to tell the guy at the other end of the cave that he had woolly mammoth breath. Here's a brief history of the war against halitosis:

The Babylonians used "chewingsticks" as early as 3500 B.C. to clean the teeth, and toothpaste was in use in China and India in 500 B.C. The first bristled toothbrush was introduced in China in 1600, and toothpaste in a jar was first mass-marketed in 1873. In 1892, a Connecticut dentist put it into the collapsible tube we still know and love.

Altoids may have reached the pinnacle of hip in the late 1990s, but the curiously strong mints were actually invented by an English confectioner during the reign of King George III, who held the throne from 1760 to 1820.

1888: Police find a packet of cachous, or breath fresheners, clutched in the hand of Elizabeth Stride - Jack the Ripper's third known victim.

1914: Oral hygiene reaches new heights: Listerine is introduced to the market, slaughtering halitosis-causing bacteria by the billions.

1918: Altoids are introduced in the United States. A few years later, the famous tin is ushered in. During the Roaring Twenties, the mints were advertised as a cure for stomach ailments, and promised to neutralize "poisons in the stomach." (We assume they didn't mean British food.)

1955: Certs and the famous "two, two, two mints in one!" campaign are launched.

1969: The Tic Tac is born. And by 2002, it is the top-selling breath mint in the United States, used most often by 21 percent of American households.

2002: Breath fresheners go high-tech when Pfizer introduces the Listerine FreshBurst PocketPaks, little plastic strips that dissolve on the tongue and kill bacteria. The strips are named "Best Invention" of the year in the "Medical and More" category by Time magazine. Imitators soon follow. That year, sales of gums, mints and other breath-freshening products hit \$3.7 billion.