



A slew of remedies for bad breath

Quick fixes can help save face after eating garlic-studded lunch

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The scene is set: 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 dinner or date like bad breath, says dentist Barry Gibberman.

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 mint, cinnamon, menthol and other flavors.

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

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.

Mints' new niche lies in strong (curiously strong, as the Altoids slogan goes) flavors. 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.

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 also can send halitosis 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.

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.