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Breath of mass destruction

Tips to disarm explosively bad breath

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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 Valentine's Day like bad breath,” said 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 breath-freshening mint, cinnamon, menthol and other scents.

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

“They're fun. They're weird,” Montuori said.

Mints

Breath mints made up nearly 82 percent of the breath fresheners Americans used in 2001, according to a study 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 said. “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 said.

“That’s pretty easy to take care of. You can brush your teeth, use a mint or some mouthwash and you’re fine,” he said.

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 said. Many mint-flavored mouthwashes just cover up the odor and eventually wear off.

“I’m a fan of Listerine,” he said. “It tastes lousy, but it works.”

Other mouthwashes and rinses, such as TheraBreath 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 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.

TheraBreath, ProFresh and other companies make entire mouth-cleaning systems designed to eliminate bad breath. TheraBreath'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.

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