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Bad breath can be more than just a date killer

Halitosis can be a sign of a health problem, so if tried and true remedies don't work, see a dentist.

By Peggy O'Farrell

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Nothing can put a damper on a romantic moment like bad breath, says dentist Barry Gibberman. Luckily, there's a slew of remedies, from 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 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

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

Mints' new niche lies in strong flavors. Altoids recently introduced a ginger-flavored mint to go along with the peppermint, wintergreen, spearmint and cinnamon they offer.



Flossing and brushing are two ways to battle mouth odor. Mints and mouthwash also work.

Heather Wines / Gannett News Service

Bad breath can be warning sign

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, etc. Brush your teeth, pop an Altoid or chew some gum, and the odor probably will 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. Getting rid of the decay usually gets rid of most of the offensive odor. That usually means a trip to the dentist's chair.

Bad breath also can 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.

-- Peggy O'Farrell, the Cincinnati Enquirer



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.

Gums and more

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.

Chronic problem remedies

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 bacteria, Gibberman says. Many mint-flavored mouthwashes just cover up the odor and will eventually wear off.

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

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 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.

