

# Talking with Patients

## Halitosis

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### WHAT IS IT?

Halitosis is a condition characterized by foul-smelling breath, commonly referred to as “bad breath.” It is estimated that more than half of the population is affected by halitosis. The malodor might have an oral or systemic origin, and might be transient or persistent.

Habits such as smoking and chewing tobacco, as well as the ingestion of some foods such as garlic, onion, and other spicy foods and drinks (alcohol beverages), can cause transient malodor and are not necessarily associated with a disease or condition. However, compromised oral conditions are the primary cause of persistent halitosis. These include poor oral hygiene, dental decay, gum disease, abscesses or infections, dry mouth, ill-fitting bridges and crowns, and food trapped between the teeth. Oral malodor is caused by bacterial by-products, more specifically methyl mercaptan and hydrogen and dimethyl sulfide. These compounds are produced as a result of the metabolism of sulfur-containing amino acids, peptones, and proteins primarily from food.

Halitosis of systemic origin is less common than that of oral origin, but can also exist. This type of halitosis can be related to eating disorders, enlarged tonsils, bacterial growth in the throat (sore or inflamed throat), tumors or infections of the nose, sinuses, or lungs, GI tract problems, and some systemic diseases such as diabetes, hepatic and kidney diseases, and Sjögren’s syndrome.

### HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED AND TREATED?

Halitosis is not always obvious to the affected person. Your dentist and your dental hygienist are obviously good resources if you suspect you might have halitosis. Not only can they diagnose the condition; they can also treat most oral problems that cause halitosis. The diagnosis can be made by a thorough oral examination, which might include the use of monitors to measure the level of sulfur compounds in the mouth. If no abnormal oral conditions are noted, a medical exam is recommended to identify possible systemic causes.

Treatment of halitosis varies depending on the specific cause. Good oral hygiene (proper cleaning of teeth, gums, and tongue) and proper dental care are the most important factors in the prevention and treatment of halitosis. “Camouflage strategies,” such as using mouth rinses, breath mints, and chewing gums might be helpful temporarily, but do not work long term. Additionally, overuse of these products may result in other problems and the etiology actually getting worse.

Systemic causes should be evaluated and treated by your medical doctor in conjunction with your dentist.

### CONCLUSIONS

Halitosis, or bad breath, affects as many as one in every two people. Halitosis might have an oral or a systemic cause, and proper diagnosis is necessary for the treatment to be successful long term. Although halitosis usually has an oral origin, some systemic diseases might also cause halitosis.

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