

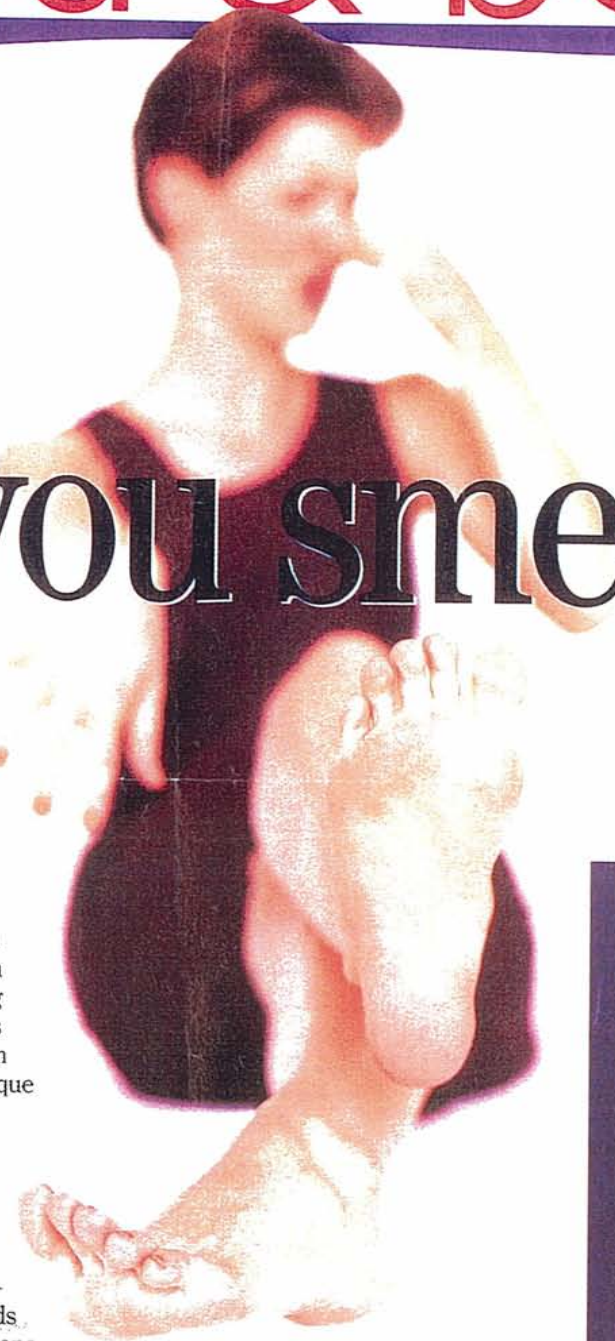
Do you smell?

You bet—we all do.
And some bodily odors tell
us about our health

Bad breath. Body odor. Smelly feet. We all dread being accused of such crimes against personal hygiene. In North America, we're obsessed with wiping out any possible trace of odor. But scientists are learning that there's more to smell than meets the nose. Every individual has a unique scent as personal as a fingerprint, which changes according to hormonal shifts, diet or changes in the weather.

Some smells even signal disease. At the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. William Hanson, an intensive-care specialist, is testing an electronic nose that he hopes will detect pneumonia by measuring the compounds in a patient's smelly breath. He predicts that one day doctors will use the aroma analysis device to pinpoint different types of infection and to screen patients for ailments such as diabetes. In the meantime, here's a guide to why we smell and what to do if odor gets out of control.

Foot odor If bacteria mate with sweat in a moist environment they multiply, so feet provide the ultimate nesting ground for odor. The bottom of each foot contains approximately 250,000 sweat glands. Most of the time, they're locked up in



socks and shoes that prevent moisture from evaporating. "It's a warm, dark moist environment and bacteria flourish in there," says Hartley Militchin, a podiatrist and executive director of the Canadian Podiatric Medical Association. Smelly feet don't mean you have a disease, just that your feet aren't getting enough air.

Bad breath Bacteria buildup on your teeth, tonsils or the back of your tongue causes most cases of bad breath. If brushing doesn't >

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Mind & body

smell/continued

help, your foul mouth may have another source—diet, for example. Some waste products from food are breathed out through the lungs. Since your body can't easily absorb oils in onions, garlic and spices, the scent may hang around on your breath for days. Brushing won't help. Some people have an overgrowth of bacteria in their mouths, a condition that causes chronically funky breath, says Anne Bosy, dental hygienist and cofounder of the Fresh Breath Clinic in Toronto. Although specialists still don't know what causes the bacterial bounty, they can often control the problem with antimicrobials or antibiotics. Bosy also recommends taking vitamins to build your immune system.

Illness can cause other smells. A sugary scent suggests uncontrolled diabetes.

Rotten or sour odors can come from infections such as strep throat or sinusitis, lung ailments such as bronchitis and stomach problems such as gastritis and hiatus hernia.

Body odor Sweat itself has no odor. But mix it up with bacteria already on the skin—of the underarms, groin and even your scalp—and you'll get the pungent perfume we call BO. Exactly how it smells depends on which type of sweat glands are in action. Feet have only eccrine glands, which produce the saline substance we call sweat. But armpits have three types of glands—eccrine glands, oil-producing sebaceous glands and apocrine glands. Apocrine glands release a strong odor starting at puberty and may be activated by stress, anger or unhappiness.

Vaginal odor For the most part, this problem is more perception than reality. An infection called bacterial vaginosis produces a fishy odor that can become unpleasant after sex when semen changes the



Sour breath can come from infections such as strep throat.

vagina's PH. The infection is usually caused by an overgrowth of normal bacteria and is easily treated with antibiotic cream or pills. According to Dr.

Guylaine Lefebvre, a gynecologist at the Ottawa Hospital, it's a mistake to try to mask the scent of normal vaginal discharge. "A lot of women think they have an odor but no one else can smell it," she says. "We become our own worst enemies when we cover it up and over-wash." Perfumed soaps, bubble baths and deodorant sprays usually don't work and can irritate the vulva, says Dr. Lefebvre. Scented feminine napkins trap moisture and bacteria and can produce an even stronger scent.

Urine For hundreds of years, doctors relied on the taste, appearance and smell of urine to help make a diagnosis. More reliable lab tests have replaced this method, but unusual urine smells can still signal a few problems. Foul, fruity or just plain odd scents in cloudy urine may indicate an infection of the bladder or urethra, says Dr. Alfonso Marcuzzi, chief of the urology division of St. Joseph's Health Centre in Toronto. A stronger than normal odor can also suggest you're not drinking enough water. "The urine becomes more concentrated and that gives it a more potent smell," says Dr. Marcuzzi.

ANITA ELASH

ODORS AWAY

MOUTH You can usually freshen up by munching a carrot or brushing and flossing.

BODY A daily shower and swipe with an antiperspirant will keep you fresh.

FEET Wear cotton socks and alternate between two pairs of shoes. Rubbing alcohol dries off sweat and reduces perspiration.

GENITALS A little soap and water does the job. If vaginal odor persists, see your doctor.

NEWS

Dodging disease

Sexually active teens should be screened more often for sexually transmitted diseases, according to a study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. When researchers studied 3,200 sexually active girls ages 12 to 19 over a 33-month period, they found almost one in three were infected with chlamydia trachomatis. Chlamydia is difficult to diagnose without a Pap smear since it often has no symptoms, but once found, is easily treated with antibiotics. Left untreated, however, it's the number 1 cause of pelvic inflammatory disease, which can lead to infertility. Researchers recommend screening every six months for teens, since the average lapsed time between a negative and positive test result in the study was seven months.

Job jitters

Worrying about job security can practically put you on disability. In a recent study published by the *American Journal of Public Health*, researchers compared the health of 530 British civil servants to 9,500 of their fellow workers during a period of stable employment and then again when their jobs were in jeopardy. When layoffs threatened their job security, both men and women gained weight, slept nine hours or more a night and had higher cholesterol readings. Women also had higher blood pressure when they felt uncertain about their jobs.

Sad at heart

Men who suffer from depression face a higher risk of heart disease, according to a study published in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, Baltimore, Md., observed 1,200 male medical students enrolled at the university between 1948 and 1964 and then tracked their medical health. After 40 years, 12 percent of the group had experienced a clinical depression. Although the depressed