

health MATTERS

By Jayne Hendricks

worried about
dragon breath?

**Most of us do have bad breath occasionally;
for some, it's a chronic condition.**

These facts and tips should help:

Blame it on bacteria. "Food left on or around your teeth, under your gums, or on your tongue, deteriorates," explains Michael Weisenfeld, D.D.S., a spokesperson for the Academy of General Dentistry and a dental consultant in Greensboro, North Carolina. "Then, bacteria normally present in your mouth work on it, and you get an odor." Cavities, malpositioned teeth, or periodontal disease worsen the problem. The hormonal changes associated with menstruation may also cause an increase in bacteria.

Look for other causes. Onions and garlic, certain vegetables, spices, and some cheeses are loaded with sulfur compounds whose odor you'll eventually exhale. Such medical problems as stomach upsets, sinus infections, inflamed tonsils, and the onset of diabetes may sour one's breath. Dieting can generate an odor too.

Keep your mouth moist. Oxygen-rich saliva fights bacteria and rinses the mouth. When we sleep, saliva flow decreases considerably; that's what causes unpleasant morning breath. Take antihistamines? They (and some other medications) can dry up saliva. So may stressful situations.

Here's how Anne Bosy, codirector of the Fresh Breath Clinic, in Toronto, suggests combating dry mouth: Stimulate saliva flow by sucking on sugarless candy; snack on a carrot or celery; rinse your mouth with water laced with just a bit of lemon juice. As for mouthwashes, Dr. Weisenfeld says, "They can mask the bad odor, which is why they have such a strong smell, but the effect is brief."

Practice good dental hygiene. Brush and floss your teeth at least twice daily, preferably after every meal. Use a soft-bristle brush, curved for comfort, and don't neglect the all-important gum line. Dr. Weisenfeld recommends using tartar-control toothpaste but avoiding whiteners and those containing peroxide. Rinse with a mild salt solution to clean out some of the sticky food particles.

Don't forget your tongue. It's a snugly nest for thriving bacteria. Some dentists provide patients with tongue scrapers, but you can do a good job of freshening your tongue with an ordinary toothbrush. Soften the bristles with hot water and put a little toothpaste on them before you brush. "If you have a short gag reflex," Bosy advises, "make the process more comfortable by bending over the sink and letting your tongue hang out." Not dignified but gives you more flexibility.

Get regular dental checkups. Even with excellent hygiene, you can't remove all food residue every time. See your dentist for a professional cleaning every six months or so.

do you have this tummy problem?

If you suffer from constipation, diarrhea, or both—sometimes accompanied by cramps, bloating, nausea, even back pain, you may be one of 20 million or so Americans, mostly women, who have bouts of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).

"Basically, IBS is spasms of the bowel, typically relieved by bowel movements," observes Jerry Nagler, a New York City gastroenterologist. "We don't know the cause or have a cure, but though it can last a lifetime, it doesn't lead to complications."

IBS can, however, mask more serious conditions. If you're a longtime sufferer, consult a gastroenterologist. Tests will confirm or rule out infection, parasites, ulcerative colitis, or other medical conditions. If all are excluded, here's how to lessen the frequency and severity of IBS symptoms:

Check your diet. Cut down on or eliminate irritating foods; coffee and alcohol top the list. Fried, greasy, and spicy foods can bring on symptoms; so can such gassy foods as cabbage, beans, and cauliflower. If you are lactose intolerant (doctors can test for this condition), avoid regular milk and cultured milk products such as yogurt, buttermilk, and hard cheeses. (Make sure you get calcium from other sources!) Or try taking an over-the-counter product, such as Dairy Ease or Lactaid, before consuming milk products.

Keep a food diary. When a bout of diarrhea or constipation comes on, jot down the contents of your last meal. Does one food keep popping up on your list? See if not eating that food for a time helps.

Avoid large meals. Eating small, frequent meals may help diminish the intensity of attacks.

Get plenty of fiber. Whether the problem is diarrhea or constipation, fiber works to regulate bowel movements. Fruits, vegetables, whole-grain breads, and bran cereals all contain fiber. Try taking a fiber supplement like Metamucil, FiberCon, or Citrucel.

Reduce stress. Tension makes IBS worse. Meditation, deep breathing, yoga, aerobic and strength exercises, a warm bath—all are de-stressors.

Use medications—carefully. If you're having severe attacks of diarrhea, Dr. Nagler says, mild over-the-counter drugs such as Imodium and Pepto-Bismol, neither of which is known to be habit-forming, can get you over the problem. If you're constipated, stay away from laxatives; they create a dependency and weaken the bowel, Dr. Nagler says. Use fiber supplements—they work well in stimulating bowel movements naturally. If your symptoms are very severe and recurring, your doctor may prescribe an antispasmodic drug, a mild tranquilizer, or both.