

Health & Wellbeing

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For some folk, foul breath can be cured with a good brushing or flossing, but for millions of people who suffer from severe oral malodour, it's no laughing matter

Take my breath away. Please!

BY PATRICIA YOUNG, TORONTO

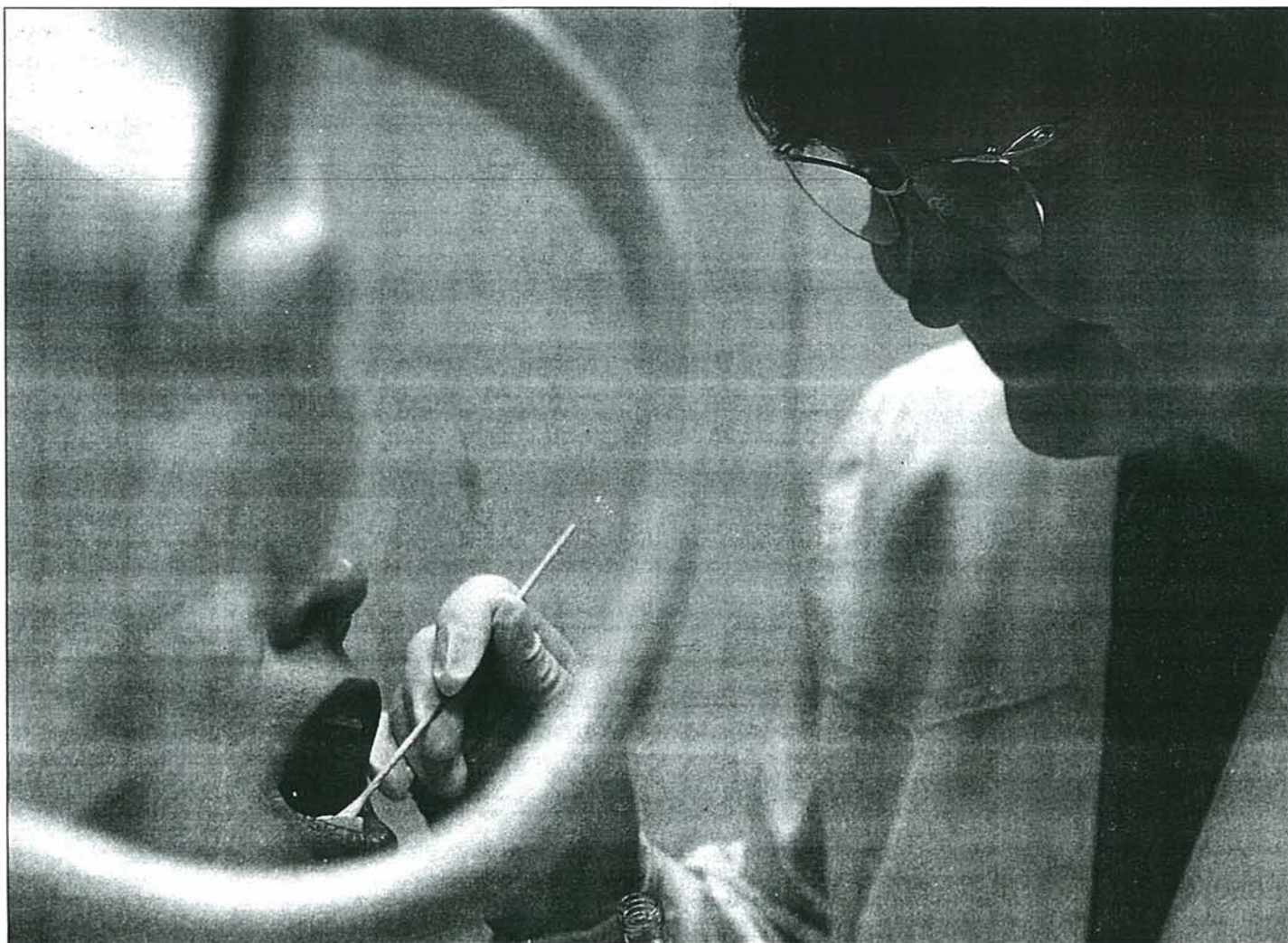
The worst breath I have ever smelled, not counting the aging, coprophagic beagle that lives down the street, belongs to a lawyer. He is an Oxford grad, a Queen's Counsel, worth millions and can sear the varnish off the chamber benches at 30 paces. His teeth are rimmed in black and a moss-like pale green paste covers his tongue.

He seems utterly oblivious that people recoil from him each time he opens his mouth. Talking to this man is like getting jack-hammered in the face by five-day-old roadkill.

He may be an extreme example, but he is not alone. Almost seven million Canadians suffer from chronic bad breath and not just that run of the mill, skanky morning breath. We're talking about an odour so intense that marriages have fallen apart and jobs have been lost.

The first reference to bad breath was found in Eber's Papyrus, written in 1300 BC. Hippocrates was handing out breath concoctions made from dill as early as 400 BC. In ancient Rome, a wife's bad breath was a legitimate reason to commit adultery.

Keeping our breath sweet is a big business and last year, \$82-million was spent on over-the-counter breath fresheners such as mints and gum. An amazing 87 per cent of people questioned in a Decima survey conducted this year, said they were embarrassed and uncomfortable about how their breath smells. And that seems to hold true around the globe. In Japan, the



DONALD WEBER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Anne Bosy takes a bacteria sample: 'I thought that anyone with really bad, bad breath wasn't clean. But that is not true.'

Clearing the air

How can you tell if your breath smells?

■ Lick the inside of your wrist, let it semi-dry and sniff.

What causes bad breath?

■ The bacteria in your mouth reduce undigested food trapped between your teeth to a starchy, sulfuric smelling mess. Think rotten eggs. Certain foods, like onions or eggs, are more likely to produce this type of reaction. Mix that with cigarettes, coffee, stress and hormonal changes and you have just created a formula for bad breath.

■ Health problems, such as periodontal disease, sinus infections, liver diseases, gastrointestinal problems, diabetes.

What can you do to control bad breath?

■ Brush, floss and rinse.

■ Scrape or brush your tongue. Dental hygienist Lisa Mapplebeck says a simple plastic spoon dragged upside down across the tongue is the most effective way to clear off any offending goo.

■ Drink lots of water. The more water you drink the more diluted the problem becomes.

■ And here is some good news: eat lots. That avoids what is known as "hunger breath." Also try to lay off the high protein diets or long fasts. These cause a process in the body known as ketosis and it stinks.

■ For chronic bad breath, try such things as an antibiotic rinse to help kill the bacteria.

Kinki University Faculty of Pharmaceutical Science conducted a similar survey and found that 81 per cent were self-conscious about their breath.

In most cases the smell of our breath is caused by the breakdown of food and debris by bacteria in the mouth. This produces a sulfur compound that causes your breath to smell. Certain foods, like onions or eggs, are more likely to produce this type reaction in your mouth.

However, extreme foul breath could be an indicator of periodontal disease or of a more serious health problem, says Lisa Mapplebeck, a dental hygienist who has spent 17 years helping patients control their breath problems.

Sinus infections, certain liver diseases, gastrointestinal problems, diabetes, even cancer can cause your breath to turn sour, Mapplebeck says. For example, diabetes breath has a distinct fruity and sweet smell, rather than sour. Serious sinus infections cause your breath to have a rotting, foul smell, as the infected debris from your sinus drips down the back of your throat. As well, some gastrointestinal diseases, such as tumours or

blockages, result in a powerful sulphurous odour.

So if you have constant or unusually disagreeable breath, get checked out by your dentist or doctor.

Most people can't tell if their own breath stinks. Forget cupping your hand in front of your mouth and puffing. It is nearly impossible to pick up the smell of your own breath doing that. A better way is to lick the inside of your wrist, let it dry a bit and then sneak a sniff. That should give you some idea of the full frontal assault others are taking from you each day.

Anne Bosy knows more about bad breath than almost anyone on this planet. Bosy taught dental hygiene at George Brown College in Toronto and then became part of ground breaking foul-breath research at the University of Toronto in 1990, which resulted in Bosy becoming the first person to get a Master of Science degree in bad breath, or oral malodour, as those who study it prefer.

"It was my introduction to the bad-breath culture," Bosy says.

Bad breath has become such a

hot field of study that the International Society for Breath Odour Research was founded in 1994 so that scientists could compare the global oral-stench problem.

"I wasn't much different than most people when I started [my research]," Bosy says, from the Fresh Breath Clinic in midtown Toronto, which she founded in 1993. "I thought that anyone with really bad, bad breath wasn't clean. But that is not true. In fact, these people brush and floss and rinse more than anyone.

"I was floored by their suffering and no one was listening to them so they couldn't get proper treatment."

Now, almost 3,000 people a year come to the Fresh Breath Clinic seeking help.

But how do you tell just regular, "oops I've had too much garlic" bad breath from clinical malodour? This becomes very difficult since most people with clinical-level bad breath are so vigilant about keeping their breath at peak sweetness that even their spouses or co-workers won't know.

Bosy has seen patients with such

vile breath that, "they can't get the smell out of their clothes. Their cars, their house — everything smells and you can't get rid of the odour." But science has stepped in with a sort of radar trap for the mouth, called a halimeter. It was originally used to measure volatile sulfur levels in the environment until some bright spark decided to use it to measure the sulfur levels in the mouth. Hit the top of the scale and you will be knocking people out of the room each time you yawn.

So what can you do? For most people, proper flossing, brushing and scraping the tongue will alleviate all bad breath. Scraping your tongue each time you brush is often overlooked by most people, but it is very important in keeping your breath baby sweet.

For the average person, a regime of this type will clear up any problems they have. But what about those with paint-bubbling breath? If they are using products throughout the day to keep their breath fresh, doesn't that mean they have the problem under control?

"These people will do anything

to stop from being exposed," Bosy says. "If a meeting goes three hours they will make sure they have something with them to mask their breath. They feel they can never let their guard down. There is not a moment in the day when they can relax. I know one executive who would get up in the middle of the night and brush, just so his wife wouldn't know. Another woman had her teeth removed hoping this would help. These people are desperate and under constant stress. I have seen marriages fall apart because of this problem."

Barb is 31-years-old and since she was a child she has been aware that she had a breath problem. Barb is so self-conscious about her problem that she won't allow her real name to be used. ("I'm not ready to come out of the closet.")

Not one encounter, one business meeting or one stolen kiss had ever been spontaneous for her. Barb never expected to have a normal life until she began treatment at Bosy's clinic.

"You feel as if you are dirty and something is wrong with you," Barb says. "I work in a people business

and I've done a good job of covering up my problem. I know it sounds corny, but I feel that [since I began treatment] a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

"I know there are worse things in the world to have and I'm grateful, but when your self-esteem is under attack all the time, it affects you. I felt like I was defective. It is pretty devastating."

At the clinic, Barb was given an assessment and started on an antibiotic rinse that helped kill the bacteria that were causing her problem. She no longer takes the antibiotic rinse, but uses a powerful mouthwash instead. She estimates it costs her about \$600 a year to keep her breath at bay.

For Barb and the millions like her across the globe it takes a lifetime of vigilance to keep their breath fresh. For most of us, it's a matter of flossing, brushing and swishing a bit of mouthwash around.

So lay off onions, garlic, coffee and cigarettes and you'll probably be fine. And if you are not sure, lick your wrist.

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