

Bad breath begins with poor digestion

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BAD breath or halitosis can be a social embarrassment for the sufferer, but it's also a red flag for health concerns, especially those affecting digestion.



Understanding the connection between the two can empower you to take action and breathe a little easier.

Digestion and bad breath are intricately linked. The digestive process begins in the mouth, where enzymes in saliva start breaking down food particles and this continues at the stomach, whereby food is further broken down into smaller particles and then into the small intestine, explains Columbia Asia Hospital-Bukit Jalil consultant general and colorectal surgeon Dr Ruhi Fadzlyana Jailani.

In the small intestine, nutrients are absorbed into the bloodstream, while undigested fibre passes into the large intestine and is expelled as faeces. “If digestion is compromised at any stage, it can lead to an imbalance of bacteria in the gut and oral cavity, hence resulting in foulsmelling breath,” says Dr Ruhi.

Signs that bad breath may be related to digestive problems include a persistent foul odour despite good oral hygiene and accompanying symptoms such as bloating or stomach discomfort, and a history of digestive issues ranging from constipation to loose stools or alternating bowel habits.

“If you suspect your bad breath is related to a digestive problem, consult a healthcare professional. They can evaluate your symptoms, perform diagnostic tests if necessary, and recommend appropriate treatment,” advises Dr Ruhi.

Dehydration can also impair digestion by reducing saliva production, leading to a dry mouth and a buildup of odour-causing bacteria. In a hydrated state, saliva helps to cleanse the mouth of bacteria and food debris, preventing the accumulation of odour-causing compounds.

When we are dehydrated and produce less saliva, bacteria multiply quickly on our tongue, gums and teeth. These bacteria break down food particles and release volatile sulphur com-

pounds (VSCs) like hydrogen sulphide and methyl mercaptan, which cause the unpleasant smell of bad breath.

When it comes to smoking, its detrimental effects on digestion are notable, says Dr Ruhi.

“Smoking weakens the lower esophageal sphincter, which can lead to acid reflux. It also reduces saliva production, which often results in unpleasant breath.”

Certain dietary habits, such as overindulging in sugary or processed foods, can disrupt gut flora and contribute to bad breath too. Additionally, eating foods known to cause gas or bloating can exacerbate digestive issues and halitosis.