

## HEALTH

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## TCM: Breathing space

Getting up close and personal can be embarrassing if you have halitosis - more commonly known as bad breath. It's usually a transient condition caused by poor oral hygiene. If you don't clean your mouth properly, dead cells and food debris get caught in various cavities. But if you continually suffer from bad breath, you should consult a health care professional. It may be caused by something more serious.

Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine regard the mouth as an integral part of the digestive system, and believe that the condition of the mouth indicates what's happening in the stomach, the spleen, the liver and other internal organs that play a role in digestion. The term *shang huo* (rising heat) is used to describe oral health problems and encapsulates the fundamental belief that bad breath indicates excessive heat in the body.

The usual culprits are poor diet and an unhealthy lifestyle. TCM practitioners turn to a variety of cooling herbs to rectify the problem. Golden thread rhizome is a favourite for balancing the digestive system. Rhemannia root, dwarf lily-turf tuber or figwort root may be mixed in to provide extra nourishment. Immature bitter orange, magnolia bark or hawthorn fruit are also used to enhance the digestive processes. Chinese rhubarb helps relieve constipation. Angelica root, peony root or areca seed are used to unblock blood and qi flows.

In addition to these options, special herbs are used to target specific internal organs. Chinese gentian root and selfheal fruit-spike are used when the heat is believed to be emanating from the liver. Baical skullcap root and anemarrhena rhizome are used when the lungs are the problem area - common among smokers, heavy drinkers and those with respiratory diseases.

For the elderly and chronic patients whose bad breath may be due to a dry mouth, TCM practitioners will fortify the spleen and kidneys with Chinese yam, wolfberry fruit or eucommia bark.

People who are prone to build up heat in their bodies should try to balance their systems by drinking and eating cooling foods, especially

green leafy vegetables and raw food. Recommended for an overheated stomach are wax gourd, asparagus, water spinach and tofu. To counteract heat in the lungs, try pear, cucumber, radish, celery and kelp. For a dry mouth, ingredients such as sugar cane, lemon, lotus root, lily bud, white fungus, water chestnut and jellyfish will promote the production of saliva. Drink green tea as often as possible. It has great antibacterial properties and will help clean your mouth. When the weather warms up, drink cooling teas from traditional herbal shops. Soup boiled with carrot, water chestnut, sugar cane and pear makes an ideal summer drink that anyone can enjoy. However, spicy-hot and rich, heavy foods should be avoided.

Mouthwashes will reduce bad breath, but for a few hours only. It's more important to maintain oral hygiene by daily brushing and flossing and making periodic visits to the dentist. Maintaining overall health and keeping your system well balanced will remove the underlying causes of severe halitosis. In addition to having a balanced diet you should exercise regularly and sleep well. Needless to say, smoking is a big no-no.

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**Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner**