Ever caught up in an awkward situation where you tried to strike up a conversation but was greeted by a foul breath odour? Well, that doesn’t sound pleasant, does it?

Meeting someone with bad breath or being plagued with bad breath can be a huge turnoff for most of us. Although it is not infectious, it does affect one’s self-esteem and confidence level.

However, one should not take it too hard as bad breath, which is also medically termed as halitosis, is known to affect one in two people at some point of time in their lives. Defined as an unpleasant odour of the breath, halitosis is usually caused by an accumulation of bacteria in our mouths. We speak to Dr Shaun Quek San Oon, General Dental Surgeon, Raffles Dental, as he sheds light on the cause, diagnosis, prevention and treatments for bad breath.
Causes of Bad Breath

1 Poor Dental Hygiene
Well, this is probably the main culprit for people with bad breath. In fact, experts reckon that 90 per cent of bad breath cases are caused by bacteria accumulated from food particles that remain in the mouth.

“When bacteria in the mouth breaks down food, an odourous gas containing hydrogen sulfide and ammonia is released, resulting in bad breath,” said Dr Quek.

Bad breath often occurs in people with periodontal (gum) disease, when there is an unhealthy accumulation of plaque and calculus on the surfaces of teeth. Plaque is a sticky, whitish film of bacteria that can build up over teeth that are not cleaned regularly or properly. Calculus is a hard, rough calcified deposit of bacteria that forms over dental plaque that has not been removed for a considerable period of time: (two to three months). Both plaque and calculus have the tendency to cause many dental problems such as gingivitis (bleeding gums), loose teeth, and even tooth decay. Believe it or not, estimates have shown that about 80 per cent of Singaporeans actually suffer from gum disease!

TIP: “It’s not advisable to brush your teeth immediately after a meal, as the surface of the teeth is the weakest after food and drink intake. Brushing the teeth then would result in the wearing away of the enamel! Time is required (about 30 minutes) to allow the saliva to bring the acidity of the mouth back to normal,” shared Dr Quek.

2 Dry Mouth (Xerostomia)
Saliva plays an important role in keeping the acidity of the mouth balanced. Not only does it moisten our mouth, it also has a cleansing effect in reducing the odour by washing away food particles and bacteria. Factors such as the use of certain medications, salivary gland problems or smoking can cause dry mouth. This in turn leads to dead cell build up in the mouth. When these cells start to rot, they release an unpleasant smell. And if you are wondering, whether our saliva has a role to play behind those morning breath - yes, you got that right, it does! The slowing down of saliva production when we sleep is the reason for that.

TIP: Try chewing on some sugar-free mints (xylitol-containing sweets are recommended) to increase salivation.

3 Foods and Drinks
If you are a lover of onions and garlic, beware! These foods contain high amounts of sulphur compounds. According to Dr Quek, when these are absorbed into the blood stream and carried to the lungs, the exhaled sulphur compounds will cause our breath to smell.

When it comes to the breakdown of proteinaceous food substances such as meat or fish, the bacteria in our mouth tend to emit a higher volume of smelly gases. Besides foods, drinks such as alcohol and coffee may cause bad breath as well.

TIP: Avoid foods such as onions, garlic and durians as they may cause your breath to smell. Using a mouth rinse after eating them may help in reducing the resulting stench.

4 Medical Conditions
Existing medical conditions or illness make up about one-tenth of all cases of halitosis. Infections or chronic inflammation in the nose, sinuses or throat can contribute to bad breath. Medications that cause a dry mouth or nose are also more likely to give you bad breath indirectly.

TIP: Consult your doctor about this. They may be able to provide alternative medications or products to reduce your bad breath.

5 Smoking
Besides the unpleasant smell of smoke, smoking also increases the risk of smokers suffering from gum disease which is ultimately another source of bad breath.

TIP: Quit smoking, it’ll definitely help you to save money and the embarrassment from bad breath.

Diagnosis and treatment:

If you suspect that you are suffering from bad breath, go to your dentist as the first point of help. In preparation for your appointment, one should refrain from eating, drinking and smoking for at least three hours.

Your dentist will first determine if your mouth is healthy through smelling your breath or by using a halimeter. It’s a device to measure the concentration of sulfur compounds in one’s mouth to diagnose halitosis. In order to identify where the odour comes from, an X-ray may be done together with throat swabs. Antiseptic mouth-rinse products may be prescribed by your dentist should you be diagnosed with bad breath. These products are effective in killing the germs that cause bad breath. However, if the results show that the odour is not of oral origin, you will be referred to a doctor for further examinations.