

Put heat on dragon breath HALITOSIS.

It's a curse in social circles and a killer when it comes to romance. While most of us experience it at different times, some are stricken with a chronic and particularly smelly form of the condition. We're talking bad breath.

We all know onion and garlic-laden dishes result in oral odour but few realise what else causes the condition or, more importantly, how to get rid of it. "Bad breath is the result of bacteria living in your mouth," Sydney-based dentist Dr Geoffrey Speiser said. "Actually, it's the waste products of bacteria that live in your mouth." According to Dr Speiser, there are three main causes of bad breath: lifestyle, hygiene and illness. "There's good and bad bacteria in our mouths, so the kinds of food that promote the wrong types of bacteria involve some kinds of proteins," he said. "A diet high in dairy -- cheese, ice cream, milk and yoghurt -- can cause bad breath, and this is because most of those foods break down to sulphur compounds."

Dr Speiser says sulphur has a smell that reminds people of rotten eggs. Acid is another cause. "The higher the acid level in your mouth, the higher the number of bad bacteria," Dr Speiser said. "Acids come from soft drinks, specifically diet drinks, sports drinks and coffee. "Sugars are another source, and you find those mostly in reconstituted juices, soft drinks and alcohol." While Dr Speiser's list of no-nos rules out any beverage other than water, he says moderation is the key. How bad your breath smells, as well as how long it lingers, depends on overall diet, health and lifestyle.

Dr Speiser has worked closely with New Zealand microbiologist Prof John Tagg, who discovered a world-first probiotic treatment for halitosis in 2000. Prof Tagg's discovery prompted Dr Speiser to open the Dr Speiser's Australian Breath Clinic, which is now the exclusive distributor of Prof Tagg's treatment, K12, a powder that is mixed with water to form a mouthwash. Dr Speiser says K12 rids the mouth of bad bacteria while leaving good bacteria behind. Australian Dental Association Victorian Branch president Dr Greg Morris says 4 to 8 per cent of people suffer bad breath, and 1 per cent have a chronic problem. The answer to most bad breath cases is brushing and flossing. "A trip to the dentist for a professional clean and maybe a mouthwash, two good brushes of the teeth a day, and flossing every day can solve most of these problems," Dr Morris said.

Reducing coffee and alcohol intake, drinking more water and steering clear of odorous foods such as onions, garlic and chilli is also advised. Dr Speiser says other problem foods include brussels sprouts and cabbage, which contain sulphur compounds, fruits high in sugar, such as grapes and dried apricots, and highly processed breads. "Dieting can also cause bad breath," he said. "When we break down body fat, we release ketones, which can cause bad breath." Illnesses and medications can also be halitosis-causing. "Things that trigger a dry mouth are depression, thyroid problems, uncontrolled diabetes and some medications," Dr Speiser said.

For long-term fresh breath, he suggests a healthy diet with all things in moderation, good oral hygiene daily, and perhaps a rinse with K12, if the bad bacteria gets particularly nasty. In the short term, gum and sugar-free sweets that contain artificial sweeteners such as zylitol and xylitol can help, as well as parsley, sage and other herbs.