His M.O. is Her N-0

It was love at first sight -- until his Mouth Odor blinded her. But Nurse's oral fixatives save this ma*rriage.*

February 1, 2001 By Greg Lugliani

Hey, Lady,

They say your best friend won't tell you, but your lover should. Damn, my boyfriend's breath is beyond beastly. What causes it? How do I let him know? And what can he (we) do about it?

-- Friend of Foul-Mouth in Florida

Poor Flora!

No two ways about it, dear, you're between that proverbial rock and a hard (and stinky) place. You don't want to hurt honey's feelings, but it may be that holding your nose and breaking the news will leave you, in the end, smelling like a rose. Heavens, just think how much easier you'll both breathe!

Let's face it: Bad breath, a.k.a. halitosis -- *fetor ex oris,* for Latin lovers -- is a national obsession. Some 60 million of your fellow Americans suffer from bad breath, and the rest of us live in perpetual fear of developing it. The result: As a nation we spend $10 billion -- that's oceans of Scope and mountains of Altoids -- arming ourselves against it. The causes of halitosis are legion, including: a diet rich in odoriferous foods (onions, garlic, peppers, Brussels sprouts, horseradish -- these are a few of my favorite things); smoking or chewing tobacco (you're killing me!); dieting (you're really killing me!); infections such as tonsillitis, chronic bronchitis, sinusitis; diseases such as anemia, diabetes, syphilis, liver and kidney ailments; menstruation (*Mama mia!*); gastritis, constipation or other GI woes; and stress (oy! Nursie's done for).

Those who, like moi, wonder where the stench starts need look no farther than the mouth itself -- cradle of 90 percent of the bad smells. For in that orifice -- time-honored instrument of poetry, passion and pretense -- microbial putrefaction of food particles and other comestibles triggers the release of rank compounds such as hydrogen sulfide, methyl mercaptan and other chemical unmentionables. How do you spell P-U? Tooth decay and periodontal (gum) disease (see "Gin and Its Tonic," *POZ* May 2000), both make for malodorous mouths. (Nursie is available to deliver her fabled "Mouth Care for Beginners" seminar in the privacy of your own home. Send pic.) And because spit is actually an antibacterial agent, say *arrivederci* to dry mouth (xerostomia), a condition triggered by booze and pot, salivary gland problems and -- HIVers take note -- some

meds (IL-2 is one. Pore over those package inserts!). In chronic cases, it's the impossible-to-reach rear of the tongue, thickly engrizzled with gazillions of Bacchanalian bacteria busily binging on trapped bits of last week's pepperoni, that experts finger as the funk's real root. Yo, Flo: Your sweet stuff's not-so-sweet stuff may require a dentist's prescription for a special back-of-the-tongue scraper and anti-bacterial rinse -- the cure for stubborn bacterial stubble, some dentists swear.

If your own orally offensive boy-toy's case is killer but not chronic, there are easier ways to bite into it. A no-brainer place to start: Make sure he's brushing and flossing teeth and gums (or, if he has 'em, cleaning those dentures!), and getting them checked and cleaned regularly. Encourage him to do extra hygienic duty after high-protein meals (meat, milk and fish), as they're high in stink-causing sulfur. Hint that he keep his crusty tongue clean by feasting on fibrous veggies (carrots and celery). Moisturize his mouth by pouring him a bevy of (non-boozy, caffeine-free -- yawn!) bevies (try apple, grapefruit, tomato, or carrot juice) and popping spit-stimulating sticks of sugarless gum in his mouth. Nip his postnasal drip in the bud, as sulfur-rich mucous discharge is *fetor* fodder. And slip him vitamin C: A lack of it may be a halitosis helper. Over in the all-nature department, give him unripe guava or guava-tree leaves to chew (said to be a total tonic for the mouth -- but good luck finding them). Brew up a homemade parsley-and-clove mouthwash: Steep coarsely chopped parsley sprigs in two cups boiling water with three ground cloves, cool, strain, swish. And believe it or not, exercise can sweeten the breath by countering the curse of constipation. Pronto, Mr. Stairmaster! (Mouthwash, you ask? Most commercial brands contain alcohol, drying the mouth and keeping the vicious-smelling cycle rolling.)

So, Flo, I sincerely hope loverboy swallows these suggestions. Still, it's up to you to start the conversation. But if I were in your shoes, I'd pray for a monologue -- and rise above it in your highest heels.

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