

Watch Your Filthy Mouth

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Men's Health

Is there a more brain-dead time than the 2 minutes you spend brushing your teeth? You stand in front of the mirror, bristle to enamel, foam spewing, with nary a thought in your head. Thing is, you're missing the most important opportunity of the day for self-diagnosis.

For starters, gum disease, as evidenced by pink bristles, multiplies your risk of developing heart disease by seven.

"Unhealthy gums result from an active bacterial infection, so there's probably something else going on in your body that's not good," says Domenick Zero, D.D.S., director of the oral-health research institute at Indiana University. And research has linked diseases of the mouth to problems in the pancreas, stomach, sinuses, and more. Luckily, your mouth is easier to explore than your organs, and symptoms appear early enough for you to stop the damage.

Here's what your mouth is saying, if you'd only lend an ear.

Dragon Breath

What the fumes are saying: "A lot of cases of bad breath don't originate in the mouth," says Ted Raybould, D.M.D., a professor of dentistry at the University of Kentucky. "One common source is the sinuses." Inflammation of your nasal passages can be caused by allergies or a chronic infection, and can breed bad breath in two ways. First, a stuffy nose forces you to inhale and exhale through your mouth. This dries up saliva that would otherwise kill bacteria, the source of most bad breath. Second, post-nasal drip is a potent producer of halitosis. "Mucus flows down the back of your nose and onto the back of your tongue," says Mel Rosenberg, Ph.D., a microbiologist at Tel Aviv University. This accumulating slime feeds bacteria, which in turn breed volatile sulfur compounds, the chemicals that create foul oral odor.

How to answer back: Start by changing your rinse-and-spit routine. "Gargle with mouthwash before bed, rather than in the morning," says Rosenberg. "At night, your mouth produces less saliva, so the bacteria aren't being washed away as regularly." And the longer bacteria linger, the more sulfurous stink bombs they can create. "Gargle for half a minute and target the back of your tongue," he says. "Tilt your head back and breathe through your nose." If that doesn't do away with the stench, you may actually be harboring a nasty sinus infection that could spread to other body parts. Book an appointment with an ear, nose, and throat specialist for a diagnosis. They may prescribe antibiotics or allergy medication to clear your sinuses for good. (To locate one, go to entnet.org and click on "Find an ENT.")

Cold Sores

What those scabby patches are saying: Cold sores feel bad and look worse, but that's minor compared with the heart havoc the herpes virus can wreak. In a study published in the journal *Circulation*, researchers tested people for an antibody that shows prior infection with herpes simplex 1 (HSV1), then monitored them for 4 years. Those whose blood contained the antibody were twice as likely to have suffered a heart attack. The reason? HSV1 lies dormant in the nervous system until stress, illness, or fatigue causes a cold sore. Researchers suspect that when the virus reactivates, it triggers a nerve response in the coronary artery that may lead to dangerous clotting.

How to answer back: Megadoses of stress can bring on a cold sore and a heart attack, so taming tension could help you avoid both. In a recent German study, 21 cold-sore sufferers were assigned either 5 weeks of hypnosis, in which they were taught to cope with stress, or a placebo treatment. After 6 months,

hypnotized subjects reported up to 43 percent fewer cold-sore symptoms and lower levels of stress. Go to asch.net to find a certified clinical hypnotherapist near you. Or consider another method of stress relief, such as yoga, tai chi, or meditation. Research shows these can quell tension and increase immune-system cells.

Bleeding Gums

What your gushing gums are saying: Blood on your toothbrush means a raging infection. "It's the first indicator of an unhealthy mouth," says Dr. Zero. Gums become infected when plaque, a bacteria-laden film that forms on your teeth after you eat, is allowed to harden at the gum line. And tooth loss and heart disease aren't your only risks: Gingivitis has also been linked to a lethal cancer. In a recent Harvard study of more than 52,000 men, those with infected gums were 63 percent more prone to pancreatic cancer than those with inflammation-free mouths. Researchers blame the bacteria, which they think reacts with digestive chemicals to create fertile conditions for cancer-cell growth.

How to answer back: Sugar is an enemy to both your mouth and your pancreas. The sweet stuff worsens gingivitis by feeding the plaque that causes it. And a recent study in the *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* reveals that people who regularly added sugar to coffee, tea, or cereal were 69 percent more prone to pancreatic cancer than those who didn't. Replace your 2 spoonfuls with an artificial sweetener, such as Splenda, or eat walnuts. They're high in methionine, an amino acid that lowered pancreatic-cancer risk by nearly 70 percent in a Swedish study.

Sensitive Teeth

What your teeth are saying: Acid is on the attack. Your stomach is built to contain digestive juices that break down food. But when acid escapes and heads north to sear sensitive structures and cause heartburn, it can keep on moving into your mouth, dissolving enamel and making your teeth sensitive. In fact, when researchers at the University of Valencia, in Spain, examined the mouths of 253 people, those who suffered from acid reflux were three times more likely to have tooth erosion than their heartburn-free peers. And if your reflux is severe enough to wear on your teeth, it may also be causing more deadly damage: Chronic heartburn can lead to esophageal cancer.

How to answer back: Soda puts a hurt on your enamel and worsens heartburn. "The carbonation in soda causes your stomach to expand," says William Chey, M.D., a professor of gastroenterology at the University of Michigan. This can pop the esophageal sphincter — the cork that traps stomach acid inside your gut. And when Medical University of South Carolina scientists measured the amount of acid in people's esophagi after they drank soda, it matched levels found in people with chronic reflux disease. Substitute water for soda and chew sugarless gum to increase saliva, which contains enamel-repairing minerals.

Sunburned Lips

What your scorched lips are saying: "If you don't use adequate protection, you can develop skin cancer on the lips," says Dr. Raybould. Your lower lip is one of the most common sites for squamous-cell carcinoma to set in, according to the Skin Cancer Foundation. Worse, this cancer is most apt to spread when it takes root in your mouth.

How to answer back: Smear on a lip balm that packs an SPF of 30, like Proderma (\$3.50, prodermaproducts.com), every time you're outdoors. Keep a tube in your car, too; UVA light crashes through untinted car windows. Also, down one bottle of Pure Green, made by Tea's Tea, every afternoon; it contains the therapeutic two servings of green tea you need to fight back against skin cancer. Studies show that antioxidants in green tea can reduce your risk of the disease by 70 percent to 80 percent.

Tongue Depressors

Decode these changes in the color and texture of your tongue to I.D. impending illness:

A Painless Bump

Feel a bump that didn't come from an inadvertent bite? Stick out your tongue and look for a white or red patch, a yellow-gray ulcer with a red halo, or a thickening of tissue. Each can signal oral cancer. "Just because you don't have pain doesn't mean there isn't a problem," says Craig Miller, D.M.D., a professor of oral medicine at the University of Kentucky. Call your dentist for a cancer screening if the bump doesn't disappear within 10 days.

Dark or Fuzzy Patches

These could be colonies of bacteria stained by coffee, tea, or tobacco. "Use a tongue scraper daily to remove them and stop further growth," says Michele Carr, R.D.H., M.A., an associate professor of dental hygiene at Ohio State University. Your doctor or dentist can prescribe antibiotics to stop the infection.

Redness and Pain

If your tongue is as red as a cherry Popsicle, it could be glossitis, a medical term for a painful or swollen tongue. It's more common in men than in women, and can be a sign of vitamin deficiency, infection, or even a food allergy. Smoking or drinking can also bring it on. See your doctor for a definitive diagnosis. He may prescribe supplements, antibiotics, or allergy meds to clear it up.