

Taming mouths that roar



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Breath doctor helps the afflicted deal with their, uh ... wicked wind

How to avoid bad breath:

■ While brushing your teeth — thoroughly and at least twice a day — don't forget to brush your tongue, cheeks and the roof of your mouth. While you should brush firmly, don't do anything that hurts.

■ Floss regularly. And try this homespun test for bad breath: Smell the floss after using it. "If it smells bad in the floss, it will smell bad in your mouth," Dr. Ken Hamin says.

■ Always brush dentures or other appliances worn in the mouth.

■ Don't wear dentures overnight.

■ See a dentist twice a year for cleanings and checkups, and have any other mouth infections looked at.

■ If you have a chronic dry mouth — because of medications, a nose-plugging cold or just naturally — chew sugarless gum or drink lemon-flavored water to stimulate saliva production.

■ Avoid mouthwashes that have alcohol in them. These often only mask the smell. The alcohol will dry your mouth out and actually make your breath worse.

"You can have an affection for a murderer or a sodomite, but you cannot have an affection for a man whose breath stinks — habitually stinks, I mean."

— George Orwell,
The Road to Wigan Pier

By Linda Quattrin
Staff Reporter

SOME MAY think Dr. Ken Hamin's job a foul one. After all, as Winnipeg's first bad-breath doctor he does put his nose near some fairly nasty oral cavities.

But the 31-year-old dentist has come into the field honestly. Only months ago his own breath wasn't exactly roses, thanks to an abscess that had developed on his tonsil.

"I would get this horrific breath," Hamin recalls of his summertime bout with the infection. "I never really noticed it, but my fiancée sure did."

That made Hamin prick up his ears when he got wind of a St. Louis dentist with a bad-breath practice that was booming.

Hamin, a dentist at the University of Manitoba clinic, headed south for a three-day training seminar in September and was so impressed with what he saw he invested in a \$5,000 Halimeter. (That's not bad, considering a dental chair can cost

Hamin and his \$5,000 Halimeter have been a breath of fresh air for people who haven't been able to get relief anywhere else.

■ Sufferers can breathe easier /A1

as much as \$10,000.)

The Halimeter is a new diagnostic tool used to measure volatile sulphur compounds, the smelly byproducts of the breakdown of bacteria and cells in the mouth. So far there are about 20 Halimeters in use in North America, Hamin estimates.

He takes four readings with a straw-like tube attached to an electronic gauge that registers parts per billion. It sucks air from the front of the mouth, the back of the mouth, the left and right nostril. (Unpleasant nasal smells can be the result of a sinus infection.)

Readings of 70 to 130 ppb are acceptable. Between 130 and 170 ppb indicates moderate halitosis, and over 200 is severe.

The causes of chronic bad breath can range from poor oral hygiene to mouth or sinus infections, certain medications and, less commonly, diet or stomach disorders.

Many sufferers have lived so long with their problem they're extremely self-conscious about it, Hamin says.

"You ask them a question and they pretend they're thinking so they can look away. They'll cover their mouth or talk away from you."

When they come to the clinic some patients — after years of feeling socially ostracized — are overcome by emotion.

"Sometimes they break down in front of you," Hamin says. "It's tough for them just to come in and say they have a problem."

One man, who was Hamin's first patient at the clinic, has struggled with severe bad breath for about

two years.

The 35-year-old had been to a number of general practitioners who had thrown up their hands or said there was no problem. The last finally recommended Hamin.

"I didn't know where to go," says the University of Manitoba graduate student. "Sometimes you're embarrassed — you're very sensitive when other people cover their mouths when you talk."

His initial Halimeter reading of 230 ppb came down to 140 after he used a special oral rinse and toothpaste for a month, Hamin says. The man is also having some cavities filled and gum disease treated.

The rinse and toothpaste contain chlorine dioxide — the same ingredient used in civic water treatment — which breaks down the smelly volatile sulphur compounds

in the mouth.

But there is a catch here. Diagnosis and treatment of halitosis, like any other dental procedure, is not cheap.

The initial assessment, which Hamin conducts for up to two hours per patient in the evening, costs between \$200 and \$300. It includes any pertinent X-rays, a session with the Halimeter and a comprehensive oral examination and medical history.

A good insurance plan should cover the X-rays and examination, which can be 30 to 50 per cent of the cost, Hamin says. The special toothpaste costs \$24 a tube.

In spite of the costs, Hamin says he's filling a void in the health-care system.

"If the halitosis has a local cause, it sure saves a lot of grief for patients going through other tests."