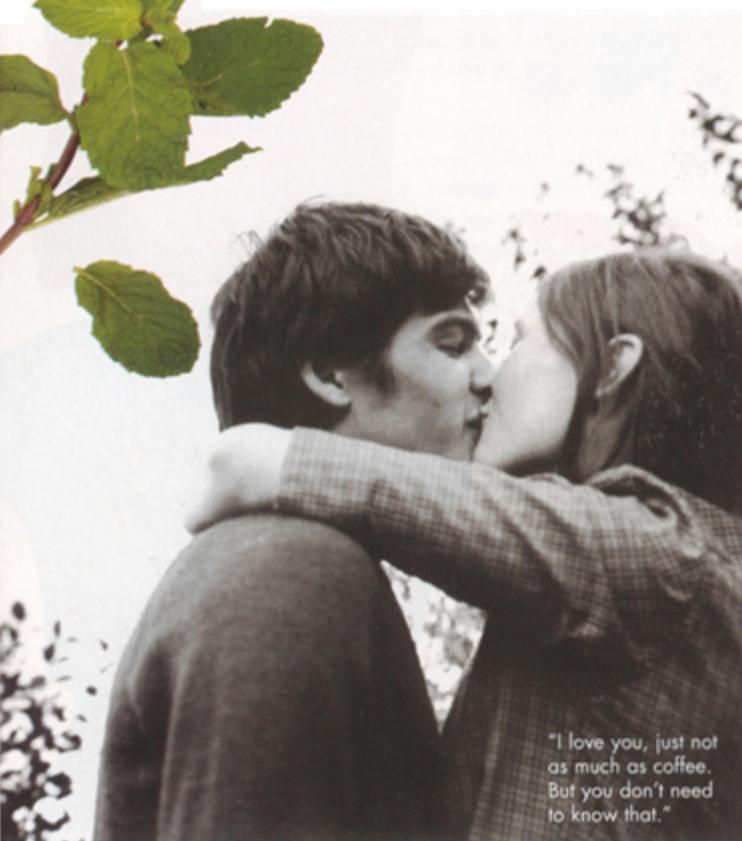


# MINTY FRESH BREATH

Maintaining Valentine's Day-worthy breath may be a science, but it ain't the rocket kind. Maryam Aragon keeps those kisses fresh.



"I love you, just not as much as coffee. But you don't need to know that."

## Are you guilty?

Most peeps don't even know they have bad breath because the bacteria that causes it builds up so gradually, says dentist Dr. Elisa Mello of NYC Smile Design. If you're worried that you're in desperate need of a toothbrush, try these self-tests care of Dr. Mello: (1) Use floss or a tongue scraper (available at drugstores). (2) Sniff either the floss or the scraper. "If your mouth is clean, you won't have a smell that says, 'There's a problem.'"

## A little chemistry lesson

Yucky breath is caused by the sulfur-producing bacteria on your tongue and throat and between your teeth. Now, these suckers feed on protein and release hydrogen sulfide—the root of that bad, egglike taste—as a side product. When your mouth is dry or you have plaque on your tongue or teeth (that thin layer of white film), these bacteria multiply over and over. Ruined dates and awkward moments ensue.

## Listen to your dentist

Get your teeth professionally cleaned twice a year to remove buildup underneath your gums. Brush (don't scrub) with a clean, soft brush for two minutes, twice a day. Duh. But if you thought brushing just meant your teeth, check this out: A whopping 75 percent of bacteria in the mouth is on the tongue, which is covered in a gajillion little crevices that trap food and bacteria, causing supremely un-kissable breath. The best way to get the muck off? With a tongue scraper.

## Floss=fresh

You've already heard that flossing slays gingivitis (breath-sabotaging gum disease), but it also gets rid of bacteria, plaque and food, and stimulates the gums—all things that will keep your breath spankin' clean. If you hate flossing because it makes your gums bleed, well, that means you're not doing it enough. That's how dentists can tell right away.

## To gargle or not to gargle?

Although you'll feel ready to blow the house down after a swig of minty mouthwash, every dentist we know warned us that most contain the housewarming gift for bacteria that is alcohol. It dries out your mouth to make conditions extra cozy for bacterial growth. Oh, but there's good news: Mouthwash made with stabilized chlorine dioxide (Elisa swears by ProFresh, \$40) is totally your friend.

## Food for thought

We all know the usual suspects, garlic and onion, which contain smelly sulfuric compounds. And do we really need to point out what cigarettes do to your breath? Caffeinated beverages like coffee and some sodas dry out your mouth, while high-protein foods (eggs, milk, cheese, meat) provide a nice meal for the bacteria on your tongue. But don't freak out and avoid these foods altogether: Brush your teeth and tongue after you eat and you'll be fine.

## Food for I'm-gonna-plant-one-on-you breath

If brushing is not an option, plants and herbs like eucalyptus and mint are great bad-breath eliminators, as are crunchy apples and carrots. Also, drink tons of water to keep yourself and your mouth hydrated. Oh, and if you're desperado, smack on some sugarless gum. The chewing jump-starts your salivary glands, acting like a self-cleaning oven for the mouth. Fresh. ■