

History of halitosis

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Abstract

Among the 660 tablets with cuneiform writing discovered by Henry Layard, a British archeologist at Nineveh, the capital of the Assyro-Babylonian empire, some contained medical recipes with curative incantations for diseases of the mouth, including halitosis.

Keywords: toothbrush, dental floss, dentifrice, halitosis, miswak, mouthwash, oral hygiene, toothpaste, toothpick

Among the 660 tablets with cuneiform writing discovered by Henry Layard, a British archeologist at Nineveh, the capital of the Assyro-Babylonian empire, some contained medical recipes with curative incantations for diseases of the mouth, including halitosis. Bad breath appears in the Talmud. One could divorce his wife if she had bad breath that could not be treated, but not the other way around (1).

The Romans were aware of the need for oral hygiene. Quintus (Sammonicus) Serenus a 3d c., Roman savant and tutor to emperor Caracalla, suggests mastic and myrtle to improve bad breath (*phoetor oris*): “*Lentiscus myrtus emendant oris odorem*”(2).

A remarkably modern recipe is found in a Syrian (anonymous) manuscript from the early Islamic period (8-9th c.?) translated from Greek into Syriac. The author recommends several recipes for bad breath: *Salsola fructicosa*, *Nuts of incense*, *Betel nut*, *Caryophyllus aromaticus*, *Camphor*, *Cinnamon*, *Galanga*, each 4g and *Musk* 8g, pulverized and mixed with wine and turned into pills. What is remarkable is its active ingredients. For instance, *Salsola fructicosa* - has antibacterial and antioxidant activity, *Nuts of incense* (probably Frankincense) are a stabilizer, *Betel nut* -stimulates the nervous system, *Caryophyllus aromaticus* is clove which has anesthetic and anti-inflammatory activity, *Camphor* has analgesic and antifungal effects, *cinnamon* is a significant antioxidant, anesthetic, and antiseptic, *Galanga* has anti-cancer, anti-inflammatory and antibacterial effects, and *Musk* provides a pleasant odor. This 1300-year-old recipe has everything one would need today to combat and mask halitosis (3).

At the turn of the 17th century, in 1606, Peter Forest (4) recommended six recipes to combat halitosis. It contained mastic as a stabilizing agent, myrrh as an active ingredient, nutmeg (isoeugenol), “aqua menthae” (leaves of mint), cinnamon to mask halitosis, and solvents (white wine and rose water). This recipe from the 17th century contains the essential ingredients of modern mouthwash.

Large-scale demand for personal oral hygiene tools only started in the late 18 and early 19th centuries. Today, mouthwashes contain active ingredients to kill bacteria, neutralize objectionable bacterial byproducts, and prevent decay, demineralization, tartar buildup, or gingival inflammation.

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