What Is Your Body Telling You?

Bad breath, body odor, dandruff—just occasional nuisances, right? In fact, many of these common issues may point to a health problem that needs professional care. Before you pooh-pooh your next case of heartburn, read on to see if you should visit your doctor instead of the corner drugstore.

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Our bodies have a way of telling us when something is amiss healthwise. Sometimes the signs are easy to ignore because they are benign or seem ordinary, such as an odor or mild discomfort. At other times, symptoms are impossible to dismiss but are so baffling or embarrassing, we don't know what to do.

Odds are, you have experienced one or more of the following common chronic health problems. You may even be grappling with one as you read this article. Take note of what causes these conditions and what you can do on your own or with the help of a physician or alternative health practitioner to nip them in the bud.

BAD BREATH, OR HALITOSIS

Possible causes Not brushing your teeth, eating certain foods, such as garlic, or smoking. An often-overlooked contributor is bacteria that accumulate on the tongue, releasing an unpleasant smell, says Janet Southerland, DDS, clinical assistant professor and chief of oral medicine at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Less commonly, halitosis may be a sign of an underlying illness such as diabetes, liver or kidney failure, or chronic lung disease. Glenn Ellis, a homeopath and herbalist based outside of Philadelphia, agrees that bad breath is typically triggered by gum disease or tooth decay, but that it may also result from a throat infection or digestive-tract problem such as constipation or acid reflux.

Try these tips If bad breath is chronic, see your dentist, says Southerland. She can determine if you have gum disease that needs treatment and also give you suggestions on cleaning your teeth or dentures. Besides seeing your dentist at least twice a year, brush twice a day, including your tongue, and floss. Gum disease or any other medical problem must be treated, notes Ellis. In the meantime, you also can chew parsley or cloves, which help reduce bacteria in the mouth and disguise odor.

BODY ODOR

Possible causes When bacteria mix with sweat and other secretions on the skin, they form an odor-causing chemical, says Susan C. Taylor, MD, a Philadelphia dermatologist and founder of brownskin.net. The funk can get bad if you exercise frequently, experience stress or have an inherited tendency to sweat more than others. Poor health, or more specifically a toxic diet, may cause body odor, says Roni DeLuz, RN, PhD, a naturopath who specializes in detoxification and chronic diseases in Vineyard Haven, Massachusetts.

Try these tips Minimize sweating by bathing with an antibacterial soap and then applying a combination deodorantantiperspirant, Taylor suggests. If that fails to quell the smell, a dermatologist can prescribe a topical antibiotic. Changes in your eating habits might also diminish the problem. “Increasing your elimination can help prevent body odors,” says DeLuz. She recommends eating fewer animal products, dairy foods and unhealthy fats, while having more fresh vegetables, which contain the natural detoxifier chlorophyll (beet greens, collards, kale), and good fats found in fish such as salmon or trout, or in flaxseed and walnuts.

DANDRUFF, FINE, POWDERY SCALES ON THE SCALP, ITCHING

Possible causes An over-production of sebum, a scalp secretion. “We also think that a mite, demodex, may play a role,” says Taylor. Like many external symptoms, dandruff may result from underlying health problems, says DeLuz, including a fungus on the scalp, stress, immune system problems, hormone imbalance or poor hygiene.

Try these tips Cleanse the scalp (not just hair) at least once a week using an over-the-counter shampoo with ingredients such as zinc, ketaconazole, tar or salicylic acid, says Taylor. Also avoid hairsprays and mousses that can make the scalp itch more, she advises. If that doesn’t diminish the problem within two weeks, see a dermatologist, who can prescribe medicated shampoos or topical treatments containing anti-fungal agents or corticosteroids. In addition to cleansing, DeLuz suggests massaging the scalp with tea tree oil to improve circulation. Sulphur-containing shampoos may work but they have a strong odor, she says. To improve your general health, consume foods with essential fatty acids, and supplement your diet with B vitamins and biotin.

ERECTILE DYSFUNCTION (ED)

Possible causes More than one in six men say they sometimes or always have difficulty with erections, according to a study recently published in the *American Journal of Medicine*. Among men ages 70 and older, 70% report this problem. Once thought to stem from psychological problems, ED is now understood to result most often from other physical conditions. C.B. Dhabuwala, MD, professor of urology at Wayne State University in Detroit, estimates that some 60% to 70% of men who have ED also have illnesses such as diabetes or high blood pressure. “For a person to have an erection, the circulation has to be very good,” he explains. Diabetes and high blood pressure both inhibit circulation. In addition to those two chronic diseases, ED may be related to obesity, high cholesterol, smoking, alcohol abuse, certain medications or nerve damage from prostate surgery.

Try these tips See a physician. “It is necessary not only to treat ED itself, but also the underlying condition,” notes Dhabuwala. In addition to well-known ED drugs like Viagra and Cialis, treatment

options include hormone replacement, devices, implants or surgery. In terms of lifestyle, men should also avoid alcohol or smoking, get regular exercise and adequate sleep, and use relaxation techniques to cope with stress. Ellis makes recommendations on a case-by-case basis, but mentions the amino acid L-Arginine, which he says helps relax blood vessels, boosting the circulation needed to sustain an erection. To counteract the effects of medications on erections, men on anti-depressants might take the herb ginkgo, and those who use diuretics for diabetes might compensate for a zinc deficiency by taking a 50 to 80 milligram supplement per day. Steer clear of yohimbe, derived from tree bark and considered to be an “herbal Viagra”; Ellis says it can have severe side effects, such as a drop in blood pressure and even paralysis.

FOOT ODOR

Possible causes Bacteria mix with sweat from glands on the feet, according to Taylor.

Try these tips Taylor suggests washing feet with anti-bacterial soap and drying thoroughly (including between toes) before applying absorbent foot powder and putting on cotton socks. If odor persists, a dermatologist can prescribe a solution containing aluminum chloride to fight perspiration, as well as a topical antibiotic to battle bacteria. DeLuz offers this remedy: Add ten drops of thyme oil, which has antibacterial properties, to a bucket of water and soak feet for up to one hour each night before drying thoroughly. Then sprinkle baking soda on your feet and in your socks and shoes. heartburn or

HEARTBURN OR GASTROESPHAGEAL REFLUX DISEASE (GERD)

Possible causes That burning sensation in the chest, sometimes accompanied by pain and difficulty swallowing, is typically triggered by consuming certain spicy foods, chocolate, caffeine or alcohol, or simply by eating a large meal. You may be particularly at risk for heartburn or reflux if you are overweight, obese or pregnant, or if you have a medical condition such as diabetes. Ellis says another factor might be allergies to foods such as yeast, grains or sugar.

Try these tips There are several steps you can take to alleviate or prevent heartburn episodes. In terms of diet, you can eat smaller meals and steer clear of foods that aggravate the problem. After eating, don’t bend over or lie down. More generally, losing weight may help. If heartburn is constant or wakes you up at night, you can also try over-the-counter antacids (Tums, Maalox) and other acid-reducing drugs (Pepcid, Prilosec). In severe cases, your doctor can prescribe stronger medications or procedures. Ellis recommends using a process of elimination to identify the cause. If you tend to eat too much or too quickly, slow down and watch portion size. “After eliminating those as possibilities, consider food allergies and ask, ‘Is there an association between me eating things that contain lots of sugar and having those symptoms? Or wheat products?’ It’s likely that just from that process you can identify the cause,” he says. In addition, Ellis suggests sipping ginger tea or pineapple or papaya juice, which all aid digestion. Aloe vera juice also has a soothing effect, he says.

VAGINAL DISCHARGE

Possible causes The release of clear or cloudy white fluid from the vagina is normal, particularly before you ovulate each month. But when discharge becomes odorous, changes color (to dark yellow, green, brown or bloody) or causes irritation or itching, you've probably got an infection. Yeast infection is the most common culprit, but others include bacterial vaginosis, trichomoniasis or an STD. "From a holistic perspective, vaginal discharge comes from a mixture of toxins, stemming from bacteria and fungus," says Roni DeLuz. She also points to medications such as antibiotics and to chronic illnesses, including diabetes, as potential contributors.

Try these tips "If it's your first infection, see your ob/gyn," says Hilda Hutcherson, MD, assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City. However, if you've had yeast infections in the past and the symptoms are the same, you can try an over-the-counter medicine such as Monistat or Lotrimin. "If you're not better in 48 hours, you need to see a doctor," she adds. To avoid repeat infections, Hutcherson says to change out of wet clothing after a workout or swim, abstain from vaginal lubricants that contain glycerin, and consider taking acidophilus tablets, available at health food stores. "Your vagina cleanses itself, so you don't need to douche or get rid of normal secretions," she adds. DeLuz says, "The first thing you want to do is clean up your internal environment by starting with a clean diet of live, fresh foods." That includes a lot of vegetables and cranberry juice, which improves the pH balance in the body. If you are taking antibiotics, also eat yogurt with live cultures or take probiotic supplements.

Ziba Kashef writes frequently about health.

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