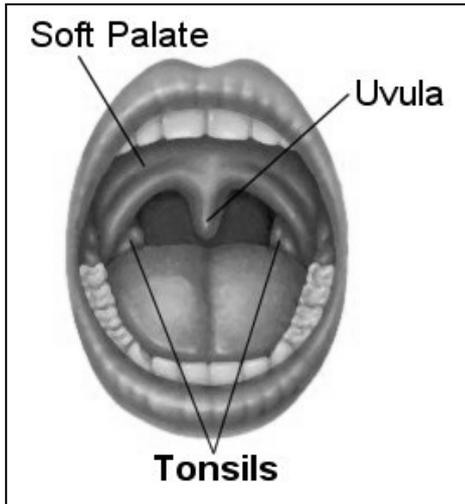


# Tonsilliths



## WHAT ARE THE TONSILS?

They are oval shaped pads on either side of the back of your throat that are part of the body's immune system. As part of their role in sampling infectious particles in the mouth, they have a number of deep folds and troughs to make a large surface area (like a cabbage). They have a surface lining (epithelium) that is normally shed like skin. If this skin becomes trapped in a trough, it usually appears as a soft white stone (*tonsillith*). There is a large number of "good" bacteria that live in the

mouth and on the tonsils without significant affect to our health. Due to bacterial colonization, these tonsilliths become foul smelling and tasting. Although tonsilliths may contribute to bad breath, they rarely cause any serious infections, pain or problems.

## WHY DO TONSILLITHS FORM?

The tonsils are prone to bacterial infection (especially in childhood). After a particularly severe infection it is common to develop some scarring. If scarring occurs at the top of one of the troughs in the tonsil, shed epithelium becomes trapped and a tonsillith forms.

## HOW CAN TONSILLITHS BE TREATED?

Most people are satisfied with explanation and reassurance that tonsilliths are not part of ongoing infection. Some people like to gently flush out tonsilliths with a water pick or gently remove them with a cotton tipped applicator. You should not aggressively pick at your tonsils as you are more likely to cause ongoing scarring and potentially introduce infections.

For most people, bad breath can be significantly improved with rigorous dental care—brushing twice a day, flossing at least once a day and using a fluoridated mouth wash available from your chemist once a day.

Rarely, people request a tonsillectomy. The benefits of improving bad breath must be weighed against the potentially serious side effects of surgery which include:

- Reaction to anesthesia: serious events occur rarely (1:60,000 approx.). Patients with sleep apnea have a slightly higher risk.
- Bleeding: about 1 in 10 adults (slightly less children) have some bleeding after tonsillectomy, usually about 1 week after surgery. Most require a trip to the emergency room for observation. About 1/100 cases will require a second anesthetic to stop the bleeding. Rarely (0.1%) a blood transfusion is required.
- Pain: normally lasts 10-14 days and is similar to a bacterial infection. Most people cannot work for 7-10 days.
- Nerve changes: numbness on the tongue or change in taste is usually temporary.
- Rarely, damage to teeth or burns on the face from cautery can occur.

North Melbourne ENT  
ABN 28 582 450 307

100/30 Wreckyn Street  
North Melbourne Vic 3051  
T 9078 8074  
F 9078 8105  
E iselient@hotmail.com  
northmelbourneent.com.au

Also located at:

**Williamstown:**  
65 Electra Street  
Williamstown Vic 3016  
T 9397 5507  
F 9397 4755

**Mr Tim Iseli**  
MBBS (hons.), FRACS  
*ENT Surgeon*  
Provider No. 231248FY

**Dr Claire Iseli**  
MBBS (hons.), FRACS, MS  
*ENT Surgeon*  
Provider No. 246559HJ

An association of  
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