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Thirsty for Answers About Dry Mouth?

A patient's guide to understanding
dry mouth (xerostomia)



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UNDERSTANDING DRY MOUTH

Are you constantly thirsty? Do you have difficulty swallowing certain foods? Is your saliva thick, foamy, or dry? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you may have dry mouth...

AND YOU ARE NOT ALONE.

Dry mouth, or xerostomia, affects approximately one in four people and is more common among older adults. Often described as “cotton mouth,” xerostomia is a condition characterized by a decrease in saliva production. This happens when the salivary glands stop working or do not function properly, leaving the mouth dry and uncomfortable.

This is a problem because saliva helps with the digestion process, prevents tooth decay, and protects and lubricates the tongue and other tender tissues inside the mouth. Saliva also helps us taste food.



WHAT CAUSES DRY MOUTH?

Prescription and nonprescription medications are the most common cause of dry mouth, contributing to more than 90 percent of all cases. In fact, 400 different medicines have been linked to dry mouth, including those used to treat anxiety, depression, allergies, colds, acne, epilepsy, psychotic disorders, urinary incontinence, obesity, diarrhea, asthma, and many other health conditions.

Types of medicines commonly associated with dry mouth:

- Antihistamines (allergy)
- Antidepressants
- Painkillers
- Diuretics (blood pressure)
- Tranquilizers/sedatives
- Antihypertensives (blood pressure)
- Decongestants



OTHER CAUSES OF DRY MOUTH

Dry mouth can be a side effect of a variety of diseases and infections, including HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, Sjögren's syndrome, anemia, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, cystic fibrosis, stroke, and mumps.

SIDE EFFECT OF CERTAIN MEDICAL TREATMENTS

Chemotherapy treatment can reduce saliva production, as can radiation to areas near the head and neck.

NERVE DAMAGE

Nerve damage near the head and neck area can cause dry mouth.

DEHYDRATION

Dry mouth can be caused by the conditions that lead to dehydration, such as vomiting, diarrhea, fever, and excessive sweating.

LIFESTYLE CHOICES

Smoking, chewing tobacco, alcohol, and caffeine can all contribute to dry mouth symptoms.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Some of the most commonly reported dry mouth symptoms include:

- Dry or sticky feeling in and around the mouth
- Constant thirst or desire to wet the mouth
- Difficulty eating, swallowing, or speaking
- Thick, foamy, or stringy saliva
- Sore throat or hoarseness
- Dry nasal passages
- Cracked or dry lips
- Burning of the tissues inside the mouth
- Irritation of the tongue
- Dry or red tongue
- Dentin hypersensitivity (extreme sensitivity in one or more teeth)
- Bad breath

Dry mouth sufferers also may experience extensive tooth decay, tooth loss, or gingivitis (gum disease) due to the lack of saliva, which can increase susceptibility to infection and cause painful mouth sores. Dry mouth patients also may report an altered sense of taste and difficulty wearing dentures.

THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY DETECTION

If you are experiencing one or more of the symptoms above, it is important that you discuss them with your general dentist as soon as possible – even if you are not 100 percent sure that you have dry mouth. Why? Because early detection could save your teeth. The longer a patient waits, the more likely it is that irreversible damage, such as cavities, tooth decay, and tooth loss, will occur.



FINDING SOME RELIEF

Whether symptoms are minor or significant, dry mouth can negatively impact the quality of life for many people. Here are some remedies that will help to ease some of the pain associated with dry mouth:

- Brush and floss twice a day
- Chew sugarless gum or suck on noncitrus-flavored sugarless candy
- Drink plenty of water
- Brush with a mild-flavored fluoride toothpaste to protect your teeth
- Use over-the-counter saliva substitutes
- Avoid mouthrinses with an alcohol component
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine
- Avoid smoking
- Avoid overly salty foods
- Avoid citrus juices (e.g., orange, grapefruit)
- Avoid dry foods (e.g., toast, crackers)
- Breathe through your nose instead of your mouth as often as possible
- Use moisturizer regularly on your lips
- Sleep with a humidifier in your room to add moisture to the air
- Visit your dentist regularly



TALK TO YOUR PHYSICIAN

Talk to your physician if you think dry mouth is being caused by certain medications you are taking. He or she may be able to switch you to a different drug that doesn't cause dry mouth or lower your dosage to help minimize symptoms.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: Is dry mouth easy to diagnose?

A: Not always. It can be difficult to diagnose dry mouth sometimes because of the subjective nature of the condition. What feels like severe dry mouth to one patient may not cause measurable discomfort to another patient. That is why it's very important for you to discuss symptoms with your dentist, even if you are not experiencing symptoms on the day of your office visit.

Q: How is dry mouth diagnosed?

A: Dentists sometimes are able to diagnose dry mouth based on the visual symptoms exhibited by the patient. For instance, a dentist may notice a lack of saliva pooling inside the mouth, frothy saliva, dental decay, and cracked or dry lips. Sometimes mouth mirrors or instruments will stick to the side of a patient's mouth. If visible signs are not present, a diagnosis can be made after discussing symptoms with your dentist.

Q: Why is dry mouth more common among older adults?

A: People over the age of 65 are more likely to experience dry mouth because our mouths may produce less saliva or a less protective form of saliva as we age. Also, people in this age group generally take more prescription and nonprescription medications than those in other age groups.

Q: What is an over-the-counter saliva substitute?

A: These are products specifically designed to stimulate saliva production to help ease some of the discomfort associated with dry mouth. Talk to your general dentist about the right product for you.

WHAT MAKES AN AGD DENTIST A GREAT DENTIST?

A dentist who belongs to the Academy of General Dentistry (AGD) is one of 35,000 dentists dedicated to continuing dental education in order to provide the best possible care to patients.

AN AGD DENTIST:

- Must complete at least 75 hours of continuing dental education every three years.
- Is educated and trained in all areas related to the diagnosis, treatment, and management of a patient's oral health.
- Is up to date on the latest procedures and technologies.
- Is dedicated to educating and enabling you to make the most informed dental health choices.

