

Oral Health Tips

Dry Mouth

Like many other positive aspects of our health, many of us take saliva or spit, the fluid in our mouths, for granted. Saliva is an important factor in protecting our teeth and dental tissues. The impact on one's oral health can range from minor discomfort to causing serious dental problems. A healthy adult produces almost three pints of saliva per day. It is only when we are suddenly afflicted by temporary loss of saliva when stressed or nervous that we fully realize its importance.

Why Is Saliva So Important?

Saliva acts as your mouth's natural defense system. One of the most important functions is to lubricate your mouth with a continuous protective coating that helps neutralize the acid caused by plaque that leads to tooth decay. Saliva also washes away food from the teeth and gums and makes it easier to swallow. It can also help repair the initial damage of tooth decay by using fluoride and other minerals present in saliva to strengthen the outside surface of the tooth.

What Is Dry Mouth?

Dry mouth is the condition of not having enough saliva to keep your mouth wet. Saliva is produced and secreted by our salivary glands. Treatment may be indicated for people who experience chronic dry mouth. While forty percent of elderly people experience dry mouth, the problem can occur at any age and is not a normal symptom of aging.

What Are Some Symptoms of Dry Mouth?

- Sore throat, dry feeling in the throat or hoarseness
- A burning, sticky or dry feeling in the mouth
- Difficulty swallowing or eating dry foods
- Trouble speaking

- Mouth sores or other infections in the mouth
- Cracked lips or dry nasal passages
- Food tastes different

What Causes Dry Mouth?

The most common reason people have dry mouth is taking prescribed and over-the-counter medications including antihistamines, decongestants, painkillers, diuretics, high blood pressure drugs and antidepressants. Some diseases affect saliva production, such as diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and Parkinson's disease. Radiation, chemotherapy, and hormonal changes due to pregnancy and menopause are also associated with causing dry mouth.

Dry mouth can damage your teeth if it is left untreated. *Other problems are:*

- Difficulty in tasting, chewing, swallowing and speaking
- Increases the risk of mouth sores and mouth infections
- Contributes to bad breath
- Makes wearing full dentures less comfortable
- Interferes with digestion

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What Can I Do?

- Take frequent sips of water or sugar-free drinks.
- Avoid caffeinated and carbonated beverages.
- Sugar-free gum or hard candy help can stimulate saliva flow. Good choices are citrus, cinnamon and mint flavors.
- Avoid tobacco and alcohol.
- Spicy or salty foods may cause pain in a dry mouth.

When Should I Seek Help?

If you feel your mouth is constantly dry, visit your doctor or your dentist to get the condition investigated for any underlying factors. They also may have ideas on how to keep your mouth moist using an over-the-counter artificial saliva preparation.

For some, it may be a simple matter of changing medications or drinking more fluids. If your salivary glands can still produce some saliva, your doctor or dentist may prescribe a medicine to stimulate saliva production.

If you have dry mouth, taking extra care of your teeth and gums is important. Brush your teeth at least twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste. Avoid sugary, sticky foods and other foods that irritate your mouth. Flossing your teeth every day can also play a role keeping your mouth healthy. Also, see your dentist for regular check-ups and cleanings.

Sources: American Dental Association: www.ada.org; National Institutes of Health and National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research: <http://www.nohic.nidcr.nih.gov/pubs/drymouth/dmouth.html>; Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/invite.cfm?id=HA00034>