

# Managing dry mouth

**D**ry mouth—or xerostomia (zero-STOW-meuh)—may be a symptom of a medical condition, or it may be caused by other factors such as medications, medical treatments, or certain habits, like tobacco use.

Dry mouth can occur along with certain medical conditions. For example, it is a key indication of Sjögren (SHOW-grin) syndrome, a disorder in which the body's immune system mistakenly attacks its own moisture-producing glands, including the salivary glands. This impairment results in dry mouth due to a lack of saliva. Certain emotional states, such as depression or anxiety, also can leave you feeling like your mouth is dry.

A number of medications can cause dry mouth, such as those used to control allergies, cold symptoms, or blood pressure, as well as some pain relievers or anti-depressants. Talk to your physician or pharmacist, or check the information that comes with your medication to see if dry mouth is a possible side effect. Some medical treatments, like head and neck radiation, can affect the salivary glands and reduce the flow of saliva.

There are personal habits, like mouth breathing, drinking alcohol, or using tobacco products, that can dry your mouth as well.

## THE ROLE OF SALIVA

Sometimes you'll feel like your mouth is dry, even when you are secreting saliva. In other cases, though, you'll notice a decrease in the flow of saliva along with dry mouth. Saliva is important for a number of reasons. For example, saliva cleanses the mouth, it helps you chew and swallow food, and it even helps you speak. In addition to making it difficult to chew, swallow, or speak, a low saliva flow can cause the following:

- dry, cracked lips;
- a rough tongue;
- bad breath;
- infections on the surface of the tongue, cheeks, or gums.

If you are not secreting enough saliva and you wear dentures, you might notice that your dentures do not fit properly. Dentures that fit loosely can cause sores.

Saliva also can help protect your teeth from decay. Your teeth are coated with a film of bacteria called plaque. When you eat or drink foods that contain sugar, these bacteria produce acid that can cause tooth decay. Saliva affects this acid in a way that makes it less

harmful to your teeth. When you don't have enough saliva, you might develop cavities.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

If you notice that you are experiencing any of the oral health changes listed above, speak with your dentist. He or she can do an examination and will ask you questions about your symptoms, overall health, and medical history, including what medications you are taking.

Once you've narrowed down what could be causing the problem, it will be easier to develop a plan to help minimize the effects, particularly of low saliva flow. Your dentist may suggest that you use a special gel or rinse designed to keep your mouth moist. If you are developing cavities, your dentist might prescribe a toothpaste or mouth rinse that has fluoride in it to help protect your teeth. He or she also might apply a fluoride gel or give you a fluoride-containing rinse during your office visit.

Other ways you might find relief include the following:

- chewing sugar-free gum or sucking on sugar-free hard candies to stimulate salivary flow;
- sucking on ice chips;
- sipping water with meals to aid in chewing and swallowing food;
- using alcohol-free mouth rinse;
- avoiding carbonated drinks (like soda), caffeine, tobacco, and alcohol;
- using a lanolin-based lip balm to soothe cracked or dry lips.

Most importantly, take care of your teeth. Good oral hygiene is especially important for people who have decreased salivary flow and, therefore, are at increased risk of tooth decay. Brush twice a day with toothpaste that contains fluoride. Clean between your teeth once daily with floss or an interdental cleaner. Visit your dentist regularly for professional cleanings and oral examinations. ■

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