

Dry Mouth

(also known as Xerostomia)

What is it? (signs)

Dry mouth or 'xerostomia' is a condition which affects the flow of saliva, causing your mouth to feel dry. Your mouth needs saliva to be able to work properly and comfortably. Saliva lubricates your mouth and also facilitates speaking and swallowing. It helps to break down your food and acts like a cleanser, constantly washing around your mouth and teeth, helping keep teeth and gums clean. Whilst it's doing this it is actually fighting tooth decay, a very important role. It helps to fight the bacteria that form dental plaque and cause tooth decay and gum disease. Plaque is the thin, sticky film that keeps forming on your teeth which is why we need to brush teeth twice a day. Having less saliva can also affect the taste of food and makes it harder to eat drier foods. Sometimes it can affect your speech and it makes people more likely to have bad breath.

What does it look like/what I might feel (symptoms)

This may sound obvious but your mouth will feel dry. There are other symptoms too;

- Some people feel that their saliva has become thick, foamy and sticky, making it difficult to speak or swallow
- Some people also have a 'prickly' or burning sensation in their mouth and become sensitive to certain foods.
- Some people notice that their tongue becomes more red and has a cobble stoned appearance
- The mouth can become sore and there is a higher risk of tooth decay and gum disease. In some cases, the mouth can also become red and shiny.
- Some people may also notice a bad taste causing bad breath.

If you have any of these symptoms it doesn't necessarily mean that you have dry mouth. But it may be best to talk to your dental team or doctor about it.

You may be concerned want to know why this is happening. Dry mouth can be a symptom of many different problems and can happen as you get older. Quite often it is a side effect of medication or can be if you take lots of different medications. Common medications with this undesirable side effect include those taken for the heart, blood pressure and depression. Your doctor, pharmacist or dental team should be able to tell you whether your medication can cause problems. Dry mouth can also be caused by medical treatments such as radiotherapy, or surgery to the head or neck. In some cases, dry mouth can be a direct result of a medical condition, for example diabetes, lupus, Sjogren's syndrome and having a blocked salivary gland.

It has also been noted that women who are going through the menopause (often called 'the change' or 'the change of life') may suffer from dry mouth. Women who have had their menopause and are taking hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may also find they suffer from dry mouth. If you are taking medication and have any of the symptoms of dry mouth, talk to your doctor to see whether it could be changed

Possible treatment

Unfortunately there seems to be no way of actually preventing the problem, although there are products to ease and relieve the symptoms.

- Saliva replacement gels and sprays
- Lozenges
- Sugar free sweets and chewing gum – ‘Peppersmiths’ mints and sweets also contain xylitol as does Wriggles Extra chewing gum – this ingredient helps prevent against tooth decay
- Some people find sipping water helps too. Although sipping water can lead to frequent visits to the toilet which can disrupt sleep. It maybe best to try a small spray bottle with fresh water in it instead just to moisten your mouth.

You may also want to avoid spicy, salty and acidic foods as these may irritate your mouth.

Another important thing to consider is to make sure you are using ‘SLS free’ fluoride toothpaste. The amount of fluoride should be at least 1350 to 1500ppm (parts per million), and ‘SLS’ stands for sodium lauryl sulphate which is a foaming agent used in lots of toiletries. This can irritate the soft tissues of the mouth further so best to avoid this. When looking for a toothpaste one that claims to be ‘total care’ may be best, as these contain antibacterial agents and other ingredients to control the build-up of plaque.

Your dental team will be able to give you advice about your diet and tell you how to care for your teeth and gums properly.

What can I do myself to help?

Maintaining regular dental check ups are important. You have a higher risk of tooth decay and gum disease with dry mouth, and these can get worse more quickly than usual. So it is important to visit your dental team regularly. Your dental team will advise you how often you should visit.

<http://www.dentalhealth.org>

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