



DRY MOUTH

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
National Institutes of Health





WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT DRY MOUTH?

Dry mouth is the feeling that there is not enough saliva in the mouth.

Everyone has a dry mouth once in a while—if they are nervous, upset or under stress. But if you have a dry mouth all or most of the time, it can be uncomfortable and can lead to serious health problems. It can also be a sign of certain diseases and conditions.

Without enough saliva you can develop tooth decay or other infections in the mouth. You also might not get the nutrients you need if you cannot chew and swallow certain foods.

Dry mouth is not a normal part of aging. So if you think you have dry mouth, see your dentist or physician—there are things you can do to get relief.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS?

- a sticky, dry feeling in the mouth
- trouble chewing, swallowing, tasting, or speaking
- a burning or itchy feeling of the mouth or throat
- a dry feeling in the throat
- cracked lips
- a dry, rough, or “hairy” feeling tongue, or one that is red or cracked and fissured in appearance
- mouth sores
- recurrent infections of the mouth or throat



The technical term for dry mouth is xerostomia (ZEER-oh-STOH-mee-ah).

WHAT CAUSES DRY MOUTH?

People get dry mouth when the glands in the mouth that make saliva are not working properly. Because of this, there might not be enough saliva to keep your mouth wet. There are several reasons why these glands (called salivary glands) might not work right.

- **Side effects of some medicines.** More than 400 medicines can cause the salivary glands to make less saliva. For example, medicines for high blood pressure and depression often cause dry mouth.
- **Disease.** Some diseases affect the salivary glands. For example, Sjögren's disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and Hepatitis C can all cause dry mouth.
- **Radiation therapy.** The salivary glands can be damaged if they are exposed to radiation during cancer treatment.
- **Chemotherapy and immunotherapy.** Drugs used to treat cancer can cause swelling and damage in the salivary glands and cause the glands to make less saliva or make saliva thicker. As a result, the mouth feels dry.
- **Nerve damage.** Injury to the head or neck can damage the nerves that tell salivary glands to make saliva.

Some people feel they have a dry mouth even if their salivary glands are working correctly. People with certain disorders, like Alzheimer's disease or those who have suffered a stroke, may not be able to feel wetness in their mouth.

HOW WILL MY DENTIST OR PHYSICIAN TREAT MY DRY MOUTH?

Dry mouth treatment will depend on what is causing the problem.

- If your dry mouth is caused by medicine, your physician might change your prescription or adjust the dosage.
- If your salivary glands are not working right but can still produce some saliva, your physician or dentist might give you a medicine that helps the glands work better.
- He or she might suggest artificial saliva or other products to prevent stickiness and keep your mouth wet.





WHAT CAN I DO TO RELIEVE SYMPTOMS?

- Drink plenty of water (8 to 12 eight-ounce glasses a day).
- Avoid or limit drinks with caffeine, such as coffee, tea, and some sodas. Caffeine can dry out the mouth.
- Sip water or a sugarless drink during meals. This will make chewing and swallowing easier. It may also improve the taste of food.
- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candy to stimulate saliva flow; citrus, cinnamon or mint-flavored candies are good choices. Some sugarless chewing gums and candies contain xylitol and **may** help prevent cavities.
- Don't use tobacco or alcohol. They dry out the mouth.
- Be aware that spicy or salty foods may cause pain or a burning sensation in a dry mouth.
- Use a humidifier at night.

HOW CAN I KEEP MY TEETH HEALTHY?

Dry mouth can increase your chance of developing tooth decay. So, make sure you:

- Gently brush your teeth at least twice a day with a soft-bristled brush. Ask your dentist which type of toothbrush, regular or electric, might be right for you.
- Floss your teeth regularly.
- Use toothpaste with fluoride in it. Most toothpastes sold at grocery and drug stores have fluoride in them.
- Avoid sticky, sugary foods. If you do eat them, brush immediately afterwards.
- Visit your dentist for a check-up at least twice a year. Your dentist might also suggest you use a prescription-strength fluoride gel (like a toothpaste) or mouthrinse, or an over-the-counter fluoride mouthrinse.

FOR INFORMATION ON SJÖGREN'S DISEASE:

The main symptoms of Sjögren's disease are dry eyes, dry mouth, and profound fatigue. For information about Sjögren's disease, contact:

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