

# DRY MOUTH



**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.

### DRY MOUTH...

- can cause difficulties in tasting, chewing, swallowing, and speaking
- can increase your chance of developing dental decay and other infections in the mouth

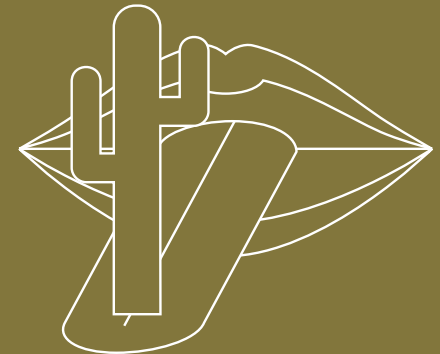
- can be caused by certain medications or medical treatments

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.

### SYMPTOMS INCLUDE:

- a sticky, dry feeling in the mouth
- trouble chewing, swallowing, tasting, or speaking
- a burning feeling in the mouth
- a dry feeling in the throat
- cracked lips
- a dry, rough tongue
- mouth sores
- an infection in the mouth

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



*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.*

### **WHY IS SALIVA SO IMPORTANT?**

Saliva does more than keep the mouth wet.

- It helps digest food
- It protects teeth from decay
- It prevents infection by controlling bacteria and fungi in the mouth
- It makes it possible for you to chew and swallow

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.

### **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 syndrome, HIV/AIDS, and diabetes can all cause dry mouth.
- **Radiation therapy.** The salivary glands can be damaged if they are exposed to radiation during cancer treatment.
- **Chemotherapy.** Drugs used to treat cancer can make saliva thicker, causing the mouth to feel dry.
- **Nerve Damage.** Injury to the head or neck can damage the nerves that tell salivary glands to make saliva.

### WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT DRY MOUTH?

Dry mouth treatment will depend on what is causing the problem. If you think you have dry mouth, see your dentist or physician. He or she can try to determine what is causing your dry mouth.

- If your dry mouth is caused by medicine, your physician might change your medicine 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.
- Your physician or dentist might suggest that you use artificial saliva to keep your mouth wet.





## WHAT CAN I DO?

- Sip water or sugarless drinks often.
- Avoid 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 in a dry mouth.
- Use a humidifier at night.

## TIPS FOR KEEPING YOUR TEETH HEALTHY

Remember, if you have dry mouth, you need to be extra careful to keep your teeth healthy. Make sure you:

- Gently brush your teeth at least twice a day.
- 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 (which is like a toothpaste) to help prevent dental decay.

**FOR INFORMATION ON  
SJÖGREN'S SYNDROME:**

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

Sjögren's Syndrome Clinic  
National Institute of Dental  
and Craniofacial Research  
Building 10, Room 1N110  
10 Center Drive MSC 1190  
Bethesda, MD 20892-1190  
301-594-3097

Visit [www.nidcr.nih.gov](http://www.nidcr.nih.gov) and search  
for "sjogren's syndrome clinic"

Sjögren's Syndrome  
Foundation, Inc.  
10701 Parkridge Blvd., Suite 170  
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