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What is Dry Mouth?

Patients with lowered saliva flow can have a wide range of discomfort and symptoms. Signs of Dry Mouth (also known as Xerostomia) may include:

- Your gum tissue, tongue or roof of mouth feels “dry”.
- Your gum tissues, tongue or mouth has a “burning sensation”.
- You need to moisten your mouth frequently.
- You generally have less saliva than before.
- You have difficulty swallowing.
- You have difficulty eating dry foods such as crackers or toast.

Serious cases of dry mouth can also have: splitting or cracking of the lips (and/or corners of the mouth), changes in the surface of the tongue, rampant tooth decay, ulceration of the mouth’s linings, and serious periodontal infection.

What causes Dry Mouth?

Dry Mouth can be caused by a number of factors. Some patients are genetically predisposed to lowered saliva flow while others may develop the condition as age sets in. Certain diets and lifestyles can also cause Dry Mouth. These include:

- Sleeping with your mouth open.
- Not drinking enough fluids which result in general dehydration.
- Eating/drinking highly caffeinated drinks or alcohol, foods which are sticky, sugary, spicy, or highly acidic.
- Use of tobacco products.
- Anxiety, mental stress, or depression.
- Certain prescription and over-the-counter medications.

Medications Can Cause Dry Mouth

Dry Mouth is a common side effect of many prescription and over-the-counter medications. Over 400 common drugs list Dry Mouth as a side effect. The main culprits are: anti-depressants, anti-anxiety drugs, anti-psychotics, anti-histamines, weight-loss drugs, decongestants, anticonvulsants, anti-Parkinson’s disease, strong pain killers, tranquilizers, diuretics, radiation treatment and chemotherapy. It is a good idea to check the label of medications you are taking to see if Dry Mouth or Xerostomia is listed as a side effect.

Dry Mouth Causes Tooth Decay and Periodontal Infection

Saliva washes the teeth with protective minerals & enzymes limiting the growth of bacteria in the mouth. Without adequate saliva (Dry Mouth) bacteria grow much more rapidly. There is also less saliva to protect your teeth and gums. The results can be serious, including:

- More dental decay and cavities
- More bacteria getting under the gums causing periodontal infection
- Greater accumulation of bacteria causing bad breath
- Bacteria accumulating on the rough surfaces of teeth and restorations.

How Can I Protect My Oral Health?

If you have Dry Mouth, your body's ability to fight oral bacteria and prevent decay is greatly lowered. You have a more serious dental condition and it is VERY IMPORTANT that you:

- Maintain good oral hygiene, including brushing after every meal and flossing daily.
- Have dental or periodontal cleanings done three or four times a year.
- Closely follow the instruction of your dentist. This includes not delaying treatment recommended by your dentist.

What Else Can I Do?

If you have symptoms of Dry Mouth, mention this to your dentist and he/she will be able to suggest the best course of action for you. You can also:

- Take more frequent sips of non-caffeinated, sugar free drinks during the day, such as cool water. Let ice chips melt in mouth (do not chew ice)
- Try drinking 2% or whole milk with meals
- Keep a glass of water by your bed at night
- Restrict caffeine intake.
- Use a cool humidifier overnight
- Avoid alcohol and alcohol containing mouthwashes
- Eat more high water content fruits and vegetables (e.g. celery, cucumbers, apples, and melons.)
- Use sugar free gum, candy and beverages. (Look for products that contains Xylitol)
- For Dry lips use hydrous lanolin USP, Banana Boat Aloe with Vitamin E lip balm, or Blistex Herbal. (Chronic use of Vaseline is drying and should be avoided.)
- If possible sleep on your side in order to reduce mouth breathing
- See your dentist frequently; excellent oral hygiene to prevent cavities and gum diseases. (People with dry mouth are more prone to yeast infections and dental cavities)

Products

Although there is no single way to treat Dry Mouth, there are mouth products that are specifically manufactured to relieve the symptoms of Dry Mouth. These include special toothpastes, mouthwashes, oral gels, oral lozenges, and chewing gums. The following are examples of commercial saliva substitutes, stimulants, and moisturizing products, which are available without a prescription and can be ordered from many pharmacies:

- SalivaSure® Tablets
- Oral Balance® (GSK) Gel
- Bitoene Toothpaste®
- Oasis Mouth Spray

A Final Note

While dry mouth can come on gradually, it should not be ignored. This is especially true if you are taking a drug that lists Dry Mouth as a side effect. Please consult with your physician or dentist if you have symptoms of Dry Mouth.