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Do you have dry mouth?

Dry mouth, also called xerostomia, results from an inadequate flow of saliva. Dry mouth is a symptom rather than a specific disorder.

Adequate salivary flow lubricates oral tissues, cleanses the mouth and begins the digestive process as foods are chewed. When salivary flow is reduced, harmful organisms grow in the mouth.

For some people, the sensation of having a dry mouth is simply a nuisance. For others, the condition causes serious health problems. Left untreated, dry mouth may lead to oral yeast infection, a burning sensation, rampant tooth decay, bad breath and other oral health problems. Chronic dry mouth can make swallowing difficult.

SPECIFIC PROBLEMS

Drying irritates the soft tissues, which can make them inflamed and more susceptible to infection. Without the cleansing and shielding effects of adequate salivary flow, tooth decay and periodontal (gum) disease become more common. Constant dryness and the lack of protection provided by saliva contribute to bad breath. Dry mouth also causes full dentures to become less comfortable, because there is no thin film of saliva to help them adhere properly to oral tissues.

CAUSES OF DRY MOUTH

Prescribed and over-the-counter medications are the most common cause of dry mouth. These include antihistamines, decongestants, painkillers, diuretics, antihypertensives and antidepressants. Dry mouth is a potential adverse effect of more than 400 medications. Read the literature that accompanies your medications. If you think a medication is causing dry mouth, tell your dentist or physician. In some cases, a different prescription may provide relief.

Dry mouth also may result from radiation treatment for head and neck cancers, salivary

gland disease, emotional stress and autoimmune diseases such as diabetes and Sjögren's syndrome. Hormonal alterations associated with pregnancy and menopause also have been associated with dry mouth.

GETTING RELIEF

Increasing fluid intake sometimes can alleviate dry mouth. Your dentist or physician may recommend using artificial saliva—available at local pharmacies—to keep oral tissues moist. Other remedies include

- sugar-free gum or candy (to stimulate salivary flow);
- frequent sips of water;
- alcohol-free oral rinses;
- restricted intake of caffeine, alcohol and carbonated beverages.

Regular dental checkups are important, too. Tell the dentist what medications you are taking and other information about your health that may help identify a solution to your oral dryness. The dentist can diagnose any problems in the early stage, when they can be corrected with greater ease.

Taking good care of your teeth and gums is critical if you have dry mouth. This will minimize decay and periodontal disease. Brush twice a day, and floss or use another interdental cleaner once a day to remove debris from between the teeth, where your toothbrush cannot reach. The dentist may recommend additional fluoride products to help control tooth decay.

When choosing a dental product, check to see if it displays the American Dental Association Seal of Acceptance. This is your assurance that the company has demonstrated through testing of its product that the product has met the ADA's criteria for safety and effectiveness. ■

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