

DRY MOUTH (XEROSTOMIA)

Dry mouth on an occasional basis is not cause for concern. However, constant dry mouth is more than unpleasant: it can lead to serious health problems. Saliva does more than make your mouth comfortable: it's important to your overall health. It helps you chew, swallow, and digest food. It protects your teeth from decay, and controls oral bacteria and fungi.

Dry mouth can cause other problems, such as chronic bad breath or difficulty speaking. Also, it may be a sign of another disease or condition, such as diabetes. Constant dryness is not a normal part of aging; it's a condition that needs attention. Symptoms include:

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

If you are experiencing these symptoms, see your dentist or physician for an exam.

CAUSES

Dry mouth is caused by problems with the glands that produce saliva. These glands may be affected by:

- medication. More than 400 medicines (including those for high blood pressure) can cause the salivary glands to make less saliva.
- disease, such as Sjögren's Syndrome, HIV/AIDS, diabetes, and Parkinson's disease.
- treatments such as radiation therapy and chemotherapy.
- injury to your head or neck that causes nerve damage.

TREATMENT

Treatment for dry mouth is based on the individual case. Your medications or dosages may be adjusted if they are the perceived cause of the dry mouth, or other medications may be prescribed to help improve gland function. Artificial saliva is also an option.

In addition, your dentist may recommend these measures to ease your symptoms:

- Frequently sip water or sugarless drinks.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine, such as coffee, tea, and some sodas.
- Avoid carbonated beverages.
- Use alcohol-free mouthwash.
- Avoid drinks that are too hot or too cold. Room-temperature water is best.
- Sip water or a sugarless drink during meals to aid chewing and swallowing.
- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candy to stimulate saliva flow.
- Do not use tobacco or alcohol.
- Avoid spicy or salty foods.
- Use a humidifier at night.

