



Dry Mouth (Xerostomia)

Understanding the Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment of Dry Mouth

What Is Dry Mouth?

Dry mouth, also known as **xerostomia**, occurs when the salivary glands do not produce enough saliva to keep the mouth adequately moist. While it may seem like a minor inconvenience, saliva plays a critical role in protecting your teeth, gums, and overall oral health.

Saliva helps wash away food particles, neutralize harmful acids, control bacteria, aid digestion, and strengthen tooth enamel. When saliva production decreases, the risk of cavities, gum disease, oral infections, and difficulty eating or speaking increases.

Dry mouth is a common condition that can affect people of all ages, but it becomes more common with increasing age and the use of certain medications.

Why Is Saliva Important?

Saliva performs many essential functions, including:

- Protecting tooth enamel from acid attacks
- Washing away food debris and bacteria
- Neutralizing acids produced by dental plaque
- Helping prevent tooth decay
- Lubricating the mouth for comfortable speaking and swallowing
- Assisting with digestion
- Supporting taste sensation
- Reducing the risk of fungal infections such as oral candidiasis

Without enough saliva, maintaining good oral health becomes more difficult.

Common Causes of Dry Mouth

Dry mouth can result from many different factors.

Medications

One of the most common causes is medication use.

Hundreds of prescription and over-the-counter medications may reduce saliva production, including medications used to treat:

- High blood pressure
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Allergies
- Pain
- Parkinson's disease
- Overactive bladder

Never stop taking a prescribed medication without first consulting your healthcare provider.

Medical Conditions

Certain health conditions can contribute to dry mouth, including:

- Diabetes
 - Sjögren's disease
 - Parkinson's disease
 - Alzheimer's disease
 - Stroke
 - Autoimmune disorders
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Cancer Treatment

Radiation therapy involving the head or neck can damage salivary glands.

Some chemotherapy medications may also temporarily reduce saliva production.

Lifestyle Factors

Dry mouth may also be associated with:

- Tobacco use
- Alcohol use

- Recreational drug use
 - Mouth breathing
 - Dehydration
 - Excessive caffeine intake
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Symptoms of Dry Mouth

Common symptoms include:

- A dry, sticky feeling in the mouth
 - Thick or stringy saliva
 - Difficulty chewing, swallowing, or speaking
 - Frequent thirst
 - Cracked lips
 - Dry throat
 - Burning sensation in the mouth
 - Hoarseness
 - Bad breath
 - Changes in taste
 - Difficulty wearing dentures comfortably
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Why Dry Mouth Increases the Risk of Cavities

Saliva is one of the mouth's natural defenses against tooth decay.

Without adequate saliva:

- Acids remain on the teeth longer.
- Harmful bacteria multiply more easily.
- Food particles are not washed away efficiently.
- Tooth enamel becomes more vulnerable to decay.

People with persistent dry mouth often develop cavities near the gumline or on tooth roots—areas that are normally less susceptible when saliva production is adequate.

How Is Dry Mouth Diagnosed?

A dentist or healthcare provider may diagnose dry mouth by:

- Reviewing your medical history
- Discussing your symptoms
- Examining your mouth
- Reviewing your medications
- Measuring saliva flow when appropriate
- Ordering additional tests if an underlying medical condition is suspected

Identifying the cause is an important part of choosing the most appropriate treatment.

Managing Dry Mouth

Treatment depends on the underlying cause.

Helpful strategies include:

Stay Hydrated

Drink water regularly throughout the day.

Taking frequent small sips may provide more comfort than drinking large amounts at one time.

Stimulate Saliva Production

If recommended by your dental professional, you may benefit from:

- Sugar-free chewing gum
 - Sugar-free lozenges containing xylitol
 - Saliva-stimulating products
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Use Saliva Substitutes

Artificial saliva products, mouth moisturizers, and oral gels may help relieve symptoms, especially at night.

Practice Excellent Oral Hygiene

People with dry mouth should:

- Brush twice daily with fluoride toothpaste
- Clean between their teeth every day
- Visit the dentist regularly
- Ask about additional fluoride treatments if they are at high risk for cavities

Avoid Irritants

Limit or avoid:

- Tobacco products
- Alcohol
- Alcohol-containing mouth rinses
- Sugary beverages
- Acidic foods and drinks when possible

Use a Humidifier

Running a humidifier in your bedroom at night may help reduce discomfort caused by dry mouth, particularly if you breathe through your mouth while sleeping.

When Should You See a Dentist or Healthcare Provider?

Schedule an evaluation if:

- Dry mouth persists for more than a few weeks
- You develop frequent cavities
- Eating or speaking becomes difficult
- You notice mouth sores or white patches
- You experience persistent bad breath or burning sensations

Persistent dry mouth may be a sign of an underlying medical condition that requires evaluation.

Can Dry Mouth Be Prevented?

Not every case can be prevented, but you can reduce your risk by:

- Staying well hydrated
 - Maintaining excellent oral hygiene
 - Limiting tobacco and alcohol use
 - Visiting your dentist regularly
 - Discussing medication side effects with your healthcare provider
 - Managing chronic health conditions
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Key Takeaways

- ✓ Saliva is essential for protecting your teeth and oral tissues.
 - ✓ Dry mouth significantly increases the risk of tooth decay and oral infections.
 - ✓ Medications are one of the most common causes of dry mouth.
 - ✓ Drinking water, stimulating saliva, and using fluoride can help protect your oral health.
 - ✓ Persistent dry mouth should be evaluated by a dental or medical professional.
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References

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