



Dry Mouth Syndrome

INFORMATION SHEET

Dry mouth syndrome

- Are you always thirsty?
- Do you have difficulty swallowing certain foods, especially dry ones?
- Is your saliva, thick, foamy or dry?

If you replied “yes” to these questions, you may have dry mouth syndrome, which is also called xerostomia.

You are not alone

Dry mouth affects about one in four, most often in older adults.

Xerostomia is a condition characterized by reduced saliva production. This happens when the saliva glands stop working or do not work properly, making the mouth dry and uncomfortable.

Dry mouth causes a number of problems because saliva helps with digestion, prevents cavities and protects and lubricates the tongue and other fragile tissue in the mouth. Saliva also helps give foods flavour when eating.

What causes dry mouth syndrome?

Medications

Prescription and over-the-counter medications are the most common cause of dry mouth, in over 90% of all cases.

Many medications are associated with dry mouth, including drugs used to treat anxiety, depression, allergies, colds, acne, epilepsy, psychotic disorders, urinary incontinence, obesity, diarrhea and asthma.

The types of medications generally associated with dry mouth are:

- antihistamines (allergies)
- antidepressants
- painkillers

- tranquilizers and sedatives
- blood pressure medications
- decongestants

Other causes of dry mouth syndrome

Dry mouth syndrome may be an effect associated with a range of diseases and infections, including HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer’s disease, Sjögren syndrome, diabetes, Parkinson’s disease, cystic fibrosis and mumps.

Side effects of certain medical treatments

Radiation therapy involving the head and neck area and, to a lesser extent, chemotherapy, may reduce saliva production.

Neurological damage

Damage to a nerve near the head and cervical area may cause dry mouth.

Dehydration

Dry mouth may be caused by conditions resulting in dehydration, such as vomiting, diarrhea, fever or excessive sweating.

Lifestyle

Alcohol and caffeine can contribute to dry mouth syndrome.

Signs and symptoms of dry mouth

The most common signs and symptoms of dry mouth syndrome are:

- increased need to sip or drink liquids
- difficulty speaking
- difficulty swallowing
- sensation of burning or pain in the mouth
- inability to eat certain foods
- sensation of decreased or altered taste

- increased susceptibility to oral infections
- sleep disruptions because of thirst
- difficulty wearing removable dental prostheses (dentures)
- cavities and extensive tooth decay
- gingivitis (inflammation of the gums)
- loss of teeth
- painful sores
- bad breath (halitosis)

The importance of detecting dry mouth syndrome early

If you have any of the symptoms listed above, it is very important to talk to your dentist as soon as possible, even if you are not entirely sure if you have dry mouth syndrome.

Early detection of this condition may save your teeth. The longer you wait, the more likely it is that there will be irreversible damage to your teeth, including cavities, extensive tooth decay or loss of teeth. Your dentist can refer you to an oral medicine specialist for more extensive assessment and treatment.

Potential relief

Regardless of whether dry mouth symptoms are minor or major, they can negatively impact people’s lives.

Here are some things you can do to help relieve the discomfort associated with dry mouth syndrome:

- brush and floss twice a day
- drink plenty of water
- use a fluorinated toothpaste to protect your teeth
- use over-the-counter saliva substitutes
- avoid mouthwash that contains alcohol
- refrain from alcohol and caffeine
- chew sugar-free gum or suck sugar-free candies
- avoid lemon, orange and grapefruit juice
- avoid overly salty foods
- avoid all dry foods (toast, crackers)

- breath through your nose rather than your mouth as often as possible
- use a lip moisturizer on a regular basis
- sleep with a humidifier in your bedroom
- see your dentist regularly

See your doctor

Talk to your doctor if you think that your dry mouth is caused by any medications you are taking. Your doctor may be able to substitute them with others that do not cause dry mouth or lower the dosage to lessen the symptoms.

Frequently asked questions

Is dry mouth syndrome easy to diagnose?

Not always. It can sometimes be difficult to diagnose because of the subjective nature of the condition. What may seem like severe dry mouth for one patient may not cause any great discomfort for another. That is why it is very important for you to discuss your dry mouth symptoms with your dentist, even if you do not have symptoms on the day of your appointment.

How is dry mouth syndrome diagnosed?

Sometimes, the dentist can diagnose dry mouth from the patient’s visible symptoms. For example, a dentist may notice absence of saliva in the mouth, foamy saliva, cavities and cracked/dry lips.

In some cases, the mirror or instruments used by the dentist will stick to the walls of a patient's mouth. If there are no visible signs, a diagnosis may still be made after discussing your symptoms with the dentist.

Why is dry mouth more common in older patients?

Individuals aged ≥ 65 years are most vulnerable to dry mouth syndrome because they generally take more medications than younger people.

What is an over-the-counter saliva substitute?

This product is specially designed to stimulate saliva production, thereby relieving the symptoms associated with dry mouth.

Talk to your dentist, who will be able to help you choose the product that’s right for you.

I gave this information sheet to patient (name): _____

Date: _____

Dentist’s signature: _____