

# Chairside Chat: Dry Mouth

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## INTRODUCTION

Saliva has many important functions. It helps to keep the mouth comfortable as a lubricant whilst eating or speaking and helps us taste and digest food. Saliva also keeps the teeth, the gums and the lining of the mouth healthy.

Dry mouth (sometimes called xerostomia) is the subjective feeling that there is not enough saliva in the mouth. For some people this problem can be persistent and unpleasant, reducing their quality of life.

Hyposalivation refers to the saliva flow of an individual that is abnormally low. This can lead to health problems.

Xerostomia and hyposalivation may occur separately, but most often xerostomia is associated with hyposalivation.

## WHAT CAUSES DRY MOUTH?

- Drugs and medications - about 600 drugs are known to cause dry mouth; including antihistamines, antihypertensives, sedatives, decongestants, analgesics, antidepressants
- Dehydration - caused by drinking too little fluid, blood loss, chronic diarrhoea or kidney failure
- Infection of the salivary glands - bacterial or viral (such as mumps)
- Salivary duct obstructions (e.g. salivary stones)
- Specific diseases - for example Sjögren's syndrome, AIDS, amyloidosis, cerebral palsy, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, primary biliary cirrhosis and lupus
- Injury or surgical damage to the nerves controlling the salivary glands
- Chemotherapy or radiotherapy (directed at the head or neck)
- Habitual breathing through the mouth
- Hormone changes from pregnancy/ menopause
- Anxiety

## DIAGNOSIS OF DRY MOUTH

The diagnosis of dry mouth is made by a dentist and includes assessing patient symptoms and medical history, examination of the soft and hard oral

tissues and saliva tests.

A common saliva test is to roll the lower lip outward, dry the labial mucosa with gauze and measure how long it takes for the mucosa to secrete saliva. If it takes longer than 60 seconds the resting saliva flow is likely to be low.

Other commercially available saliva tests are available from dental suppliers and can be useful diagnostic aids.

## SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS

A person with dry mouth can experience:

- Difficulty in speaking, chewing and swallowing
- An altered sense of taste
- Thick stringy saliva
- A burning sensation on the oral mucosa and tongue
- Dry lips
- Bad breath
- Mouth ulcers
- Difficulties wearing dentures
- Sleep disturbances
- Acid reflux or heartburn

Clinical signs of dry mouth observed by a dentist may include:

- Angular cheilitis
- Dry, glazed, red oral mucosa
- Atrophy of filiform papillae
- Increased caries experience, especially cervical caries
- Tooth erosion
- Infections in and around the mouth (such as oral candidiasis)
- Unstimulated saliva flow rate  $\leq 0.1$  ml/min
- Stimulated saliva flow rate (chewing gum or paraffin)  $\leq 0.5$ - $0.7$  ml/min

## TREATMENT OF DRY MOUTH

A dentist may recommend:

- Substitutions or altered dose of medications that cause dry mouth
- Saliva substitutes
- Dry mouth products including

toothpaste, mouthwash, gums and topical gels

- Antibiotics or anti-fungal drugs to treat an infection
- Surgery to relieve salivary gland blockages
- Other treatments for underlying conditions such as Sjögren's syndrome or diabetes

## TIPS FOR LIVING WITH DRY MOUTH

Patients should be guided by their dentists. Some suggestions are to:

- Eat chewy foods to stimulate saliva and chew thoroughly before swallowing
- Avoid dry crunchy foods that could injure the mouth
- Avoid acidic foods and beverages such as soft drinks, citrus fruits/juices/lollies and alcohol
- Restrict sugary foods and drinks to meal times or avoid them altogether
- Avoid mint lollies and mint mouthwashes as these products can aggravate a dry mouth and increase the risk of tooth decay
- Avoid cigarettes, alcohol, caffeinated drinks and spicy foods
- Add dairy milk if drinking tea or coffee
- Chew sugar-free gum between meals
- Drink plenty of water though avoid sipping slowly as this may wash away resting saliva
- Brush and floss teeth at least twice daily
- Regularly use fluoride-containing products; ask a dentist which ones are best
- Apply Vaseline to dry lips; use an air humidifier in the bedroom at night
- Use a denture adhesive
- Take out dentures while sleeping
- Visit the dentist regularly

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Content adapted from  
1. Fejerskov, O., et al., *Dental caries*. 2003: Blackwell Munksgaard.  
2. *eviDent PREVENT study fact sheets: "What is dry mouth?/Care of a dry mouth"*.  
3. Better Health Channel "Dry Mouth Syndrome" fact sheet.