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WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT XEROSTOMIA

Xerostomia, more commonly known as dry mouth, is a condition related to the salivary glands, which help keep the mouth moist, thus preventing decay and other oral health problems. When the salivary glands do not work properly, the amount of saliva in the mouth decreases, resulting in xerostomia.

Everyone has a dry mouth once in a while, but if you often find that your mouth is dry, it could be a sign of certain diseases and conditions, according to the National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research.



What causes dry mouth?

Prescription and over-the-counter medications are the most common cause of dry mouth. There are more than 400 medications that can contribute to mouth dryness, including antihypertensives, antidepressants, painkillers, tranquilizers, diuretics and antihistamines. Dry mouth also can be caused by radiation therapy and chemotherapy, hormonal alterations or other diseases, such as diabetes, lupus, Alzheimer's disease and kidney disease. Other contributing factors include stress, anxiety, depression, nutritional deficiencies and dysfunction of the immune system.

How important is saliva?

Saliva is a natural defense for teeth and is vital to every-day processes such as tasting, swallowing, speaking and digesting. Without it, teeth are vulnerable to tooth decay and bacterial, fungal and viral infections. Human saliva is composed mostly of water, but also includes electrolytes, mucus, antibacterial compounds and various enzymes. The components of saliva play a major role in keeping your mouth healthy by rinsing away food particles, neutralizing harmful acids and providing enzymes to help digest food.

What are the signs and symptoms of dry mouth?

- Increased need to sip or drink fluids when swallowing
- Difficulty speaking
- Difficulty swallowing
- Burning sensation or soreness in the mouth
- Inability to eat certain foods
- Diminished or altered sense of taste
- Increased susceptibility to oral infection
- Sleep interruptions due to thirst
- Difficulty wearing dentures
- Tooth decay
- Gingivitis
- Halitosis (stale or bad breath)

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How can my dentist help alleviate my symptoms of dry mouth?

If you exhibit any of the symptoms of dry mouth, it's important to contact your dentist so that he or she can properly evaluate and diagnose the condition. A variety of methods are available to help patients manage dry mouth.

Your dentist may recommend using saliva substitutes and over-the-counter mouthwashes, gels and sprays. In addition, your dentist may suggest that you change your diet, avoiding alcohol, caffeine, smoking, citrus juices, dry foods and overly salty foods. Of course, your dentist also will recommend brushing and flossing twice a day, chewing sugarless gum, drinking plenty of water and maintaining regular dental visits. For more information, talk with your dentist.