
Dry mouth

This fact sheet explains what causes a dry mouth and what you should do about it.

Having a dry mouth

A dry mouth (or xerostomia) is due to decreased saliva flow or changes in the amount of saliva produced. It can be mild or severe and often develops gradually.

If you have a dry mouth, you may experience the following symptoms:

- a sore throat
- dry, tingling or burning sensation of the tongue or mouth
- difficulty swallowing
- thirst
- dry, cracked lips or sores and split skin at the corners of the mouth
- bad breath
- hoarseness
- thick, stringy saliva
- dry nasal passages
- problems with speaking, and/or
- oral thrush.

Why is saliva so important?

Saliva is the body's natural defence against tooth decay. Saliva washes away food debris from around the teeth, neutralises harmful acids produced by plaque and foods and drinks, protects the soft tissues of the mouth and prevents fungal infections. Saliva also acts as a vehicle for minerals such as fluoride, calcium and phosphate, which help strengthen tooth enamel.

Without adequate saliva to lubricate the mouth, wash away food, and neutralise the acids produced by plaque, your teeth are at risk of extensive decay.

What causes a dry mouth?

Saliva flow can decrease with age. A dry mouth is also commonly caused by medical conditions such as Sjögren's syndrome, lupus, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and stroke, and medicines such as antidepressants, antihistamines, decongestants, blood pressure medication, painkillers and diuretics. Chemotherapy and radiotherapy (especially radiation to the head and neck) can also cause a dry mouth.

The following may also contribute to a dry mouth:

- smoking
- drinking alcohol
- snoring
- breathing through your mouth
- drinking caffeinated beverages
- depression
- stress, and/or
- dehydration (eg. from fever, vomiting, diarrhoea, sport or inadequate fluid intake).

What should I do?

Your doctor or dental professional will be able to establish and treat the cause of your dry mouth. It may simply be a matter of making changes such as reducing your intake of caffeinated beverages and increasing your intake of water. To help protect against decay and erosion, a dental professional may also recommend use of products such as fluoride mouth rinses, gels or toothpaste with a higher level of fluoride.

To relieve the discomfort of a dry mouth:

- chew sugar-free gum to increase saliva flow
- use 'saliva substitutes' (available from most pharmacies)

- use a small spray bottle (atomiser) to frequently spray water into the mouth, and
- take frequent small sips of water.

You might also like to try the following tips:

- Do not use sugary sweets or drinks to relieve the feeling of a dry mouth. These habits can cause very rapid tooth decay.
- Brush teeth with a soft toothbrush and a low-abrasive, low-foaming fluoride toothpaste, and floss regularly.
- Don't smoke.
- Limit alcohol consumption.
- Limit consumption of caffeinated drinks such as tea, coffee and soft drinks.
- Use gravies and sauces to make food softer and easier to chew and swallow.
- Use a lip balm to soothe and protect dry lips.
- Avoid mouth rinses containing alcohol or peroxide.

Remember

A dry mouth can rapidly deteriorate oral health. Consult a dental professional for advice.

For more information

- Contact your dental professional
- Visit www.health.qld.gov.au/oralhealth
- Call 13 HEALTH (13 43 25 84) for confidential health advice 24 hours a day, seven days a week
- Email oral_health@health.qld.gov.au.

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