



Somebody Bring Me Some Water

Xerostomia (or dry mouth as it is commonly referred to) can leave your mouth feeling as parched as the Sahara

By Cheryl Embrett

If your mouth often feels dry and uncomfortable, you may have xerostomia. That's the clinical term for dry mouth — a common condition that occurs when the amount of saliva in your mouth, well, dries up. A reduced saliva flow may lead to all kinds of problems, including bad breath, cavities, oral trauma, gum disease, mouth infections and difficulty swallowing, eating or talking.

Saliva has antibacterial, digestive, mineralizing and lubricating properties that keep the mouth healthy, and both the quantity and quality are important, says Dr. Deborah Saunders, Medical Director of the Dental Oncology Program at North East Cancer Centre in Sudbury, Ont.



Who gets dry mouth?

While anyone can develop dry mouth, it's most common in older patients who tend to be on more medications and are more likely to have had a recent change in health, says Dr. Gillian Soskin, a full-time dentist at London Health Sciences Centre in London, Ont.

What causes it?

Dry mouth can be caused by many factors, but medications are the biggest culprit, especially medications for anxiety, depression or hypertension, says Dr. Saunders. And taking multiple medications complicates matters, she adds. "One medication may cause a bit of dryness but when you add another one plus one plus one, you have four-fold dryness and that may have a huge impact." Medical conditions such as cancer, diabetes and Sjögren's syndrome are also associated with xerostomia. (Sjögren's is an auto-immune disorder that can cause dry, sandy eyes and a dry mouth¹, notes Dr. Saunders.)

"It's important that people are aware of the medications they're taking and the medical conditions that can have an effect on the environment in their mouth and talk to their dentist about it," says Dr. Ian McConnachie, an Ottawa pediatric dentist and Past President of the Ontario Dental Association.



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about dry mouth.



Ways to decrease and treat dry mouth symptoms

There are a number of dry mouth treatments that will help restore moisture to the mouth. But the first step is always to discuss your symptoms and possible treatment with your dentist. Says Dr. Saunders: "The best defence against dry mouth is moisturizing the mouth to relieve dryness. As plaque is difficult to control in a dry mouth, sugar-free foods are recommended. Saliva also serves to wash away food debris and this helps to control plaque as well."

"Your dentist can help you come up with a plan to treat both the symptoms and the side-effects, such as decay," says Dr. Soskin. Your dentist may suggest one or more of the following:

- **H₂O.** While there are many salivary substitutes on the market, some people don't like the texture," says Dr. Soskin. "A lot of my patients prefer to take frequent sips of water instead."
- **Bland mouth rinse.** Dr. Saunders recommends a standard bland rinse from Cancer Care Ontario for anyone experiencing dry mouth. Mix 1/2 teaspoon of baking soda and 1/2 teaspoon of salt in two cups (500 mL) of water and rinse whenever your mouth is feeling dry. (Do not refrigerate.²) "If you have a dry mouth, your oral environment tends to be acidic and the sodium bicarbonate in baking soda helps neutralize that acidity," says Dr. Soskin.
- **Xylitol lozenges.** These can be purchased at the drugstore or through your dental office to help stimulate saliva and keep your mouth free of plaque, advises Dr. Saunders.
- **Your dentist may also recommend topical fluoride application trays (to be used in the dental office under your dentist's supervision).** "These are a major part of treatment since the biggest problem for patients with dry mouth is rampant decay," says Dr. Soskin. ■



1 Mayo Clinic website: www.mayoclinic.com/health/sjogrens-syndrome/DS00147

2 Cancer Care Ontario website: www.cco.ca