

Xerostomia

What is xerostomia?

Xerostomia 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—or, as it's more commonly known, dry mouth.

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 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, as is seen in individuals with HIV/AIDS.

How important is saliva?

Saliva is vital to everyday processes such as tasting, swallowing, speaking, and digesting. Saliva is a natural defense for teeth. Without saliva, 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?

Symptoms of dry mouth may include the following:

- Increased need to sip or drink fluids when swallowing
- Difficulty speaking
- Difficulty swallowing
- A 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
- Stale or bad breath

How can my dentist help?

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. To ease discomfort, your dentist also may recommend brushing and flossing twice a day, chewing sugarless gum, drinking plenty of water, and maintaining regular dental visits. In addition, your dentist may suggest that you change your diet, avoiding alcohol, caffeine, smoking, citrus juices, dry foods, and overly salty foods. For more information, talk with your dentist.