



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia

Self Care
™ Health Advice for Life

Dry Mouth

Mouth dryness is common. A continual dry mouth can be uncomfortable and affect oral and dental health. Dry mouth is often a side effect of medicines or the result of medical treatment. There are simple ways to reduce mouth dryness and protect the mouth and teeth.

The medical name for a dry mouth is xerostomia. This condition is usually due to changes in saliva production, quality and flow.

Saliva

Saliva is the clear fluid secreted by the salivary glands in the mouth. Saliva assists speech, taste and swallowing and prepares food for digestion. It washes away food and plaque from teeth, helps prevent tooth decay and protects against mouth and gum infections. Most healthy adults secrete about 1.5 litres of saliva per day. Saliva production commonly decreases with age, but it can also be affected by illness and medicines.

Signs and symptoms

Mouth dryness can be mild or severe and can affect different people in different ways. Because it often develops gradually, it may go unnoticed until it causes a significant problem. Symptoms and problems associated with a dry mouth include:

- Thick, stringy saliva
- Continual need for drinks
- Dry and cracked lips
- Sores and split skin at mouth corners
- Dry and damaged lining inside the mouth
- Dry, burning or tingling tongue
- Sore throat
- Changes in taste
- Bad breath
- Difficulty with speaking
- Difficulty with chewing and swallowing
- Increase in plaque and tooth decay
- Mouth and gum infections (e.g., oral thrush)
- Difficulty wearing dentures.

Women with a dry mouth may find lipstick sticks to their teeth.



Causes

Common causes of a dry mouth include:

- Medicines – this is the most common cause of dry mouth (more than 400 commonly used medicines can cause a dry mouth)
- Recreational drugs (e.g., marijuana, heroin)
- Cancer chemotherapy
- Radiotherapy – especially radiation to the head and neck
- Nerve damage to the head and neck
- Medical conditions such as Sjogren's syndrome, lupus, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease, HIV
- Stroke
- Anxiety and depression
- Dehydration (e.g., from burns, fever, vomiting and diarrhoea).

Other factors that may contribute to mouth dryness include:

- Smoking
- Alcohol – as it can be dehydrating
- Caffeine drinks – as they can be dehydrating
- Snoring
- Breathing through the mouth
- CPAP therapy for sleep apnoea.

Management

The best way to treat a dry mouth is to identify and correct the cause, but in many cases this is not possible.

Fortunately, there are simple ways to manage dry mouth and feel more comfortable, improve oral hygiene and prevent tooth decay.

- Consult a doctor or pharmacist about managing the effects of medicines and medical treatments.
- Have a regular dental check. A dentist can advise on oral hygiene and tooth and gum care.
- Brush teeth twice a day with a soft brush and low-abrasive fluoride toothpaste. Floss teeth at least once a day. Fluoride mouthwashes and gels and special dental creams can also help prevent tooth decay.
- Avoid toothpastes containing sodium lauryl sulphate (a type of detergent). Special toothpastes for dry mouth are available.
- Avoid mouthwashes and rinses containing alcohol or peroxide.
- Suck on sugar free, hard lollies or chew sugar free gum to increase saliva flow. Saliva flow is especially stimulated by sour flavours. Look for products made specifically for treating dry mouth.
- 'Saliva substitute' sprays, mouthwashes, liquids and gels are available from most pharmacies. These preparations mimic natural saliva in content and action. They keep the mouth moist and are longer lasting than other mouth rinses. They can be used 'as often as needed' and can be applied to dentures before insertion.
- Certain medicines can stimulate saliva flow and may help some people – ask a doctor or pharmacist.

Important

Mouth dryness can cause a deterioration in oral and dental health and interfere with speaking and swallowing. If you have a continual dry mouth, mouth cleaning and care is vital. Consult a doctor, dentist or pharmacist for advice.

Self care

- Sip water and sugar free drinks regularly throughout the day.
- Suck on ice chips or sugar free ice blocks.
- Eat moist foods. Use gravies, sauces and purees to soften food.
- Try smaller, more frequent meals.
- Rinse mouth with plain water after eating.
- Don't smoke.
- Limit alcohol and caffeine drinks (e.g., tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks).
- Avoid salty, acidic or sugar containing foods and drinks.
- Protect lips with a moisturising lip balm or lubricant.
- Breathe through the nose, not the mouth.
- If air is dry, use a humidifier or vaporiser, especially at night.

Related fact cards

- *Mouth Ulcers*
- *Oral Health*
- *Vitamins*

For more information

A doctor – listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

A dentist – listed under 'Dentists' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask the pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist