

Why and how to deal with dry mouth?

Why is dry mouth important?

Dry mouth is neglected most of the time, but it may not be a minor symptom. It can be quite important not only because it is uncomfortable but also because saliva protects the teeth, tongue, and mouth because saliva has antibacterial, buffering, and remineralization effects.

So if a person has dry mouth, he/she can develop dental caries or infection of the tongue/mouth. This problem can be compounded by the fact that patients with a depressive disorder may have worse self-care (including dental) behaviors than other persons.

In addition, dry mouth can lead to impairment in taste, inflammation of the mouth, inflammation of the gums, halitosis (bad breath), dry lips, impaired fitting of dentures, impaired sleep, etc.

Which medications cause dry mouth?

Dry mouth can be caused by hundreds of medications. Psychiatric medications (from several different groups) are perhaps the most common culprits. For example, up to a third of patients on an SSRI antidepressant have dry mouth.

Avoid things that will dry the mouth further

1. Alcohol-based mouthwash like Listerine
2. Tobacco in any form
3. Caffeine (as much as possible)

Improve oral hygiene

If a person has dry mouth, he/she needs to take MORE care of the teeth than other people.

1. Brush the teeth at least twice a day, preferably three times a day
2. Rinse the mouth out after every meal and every sugar-containing drink
3. Floss every single day, even if he/she was not that regular in the past
4. More frequent dental cleanings — every three months rather than every four months as is standard in the US. However, dental insurance pays for only two cleanings per year, so the person has to be willing to pay out of pocket for the additional cleanings. Getting extra cleanings is wise when there is any increased risk for dental caries. For example, when children have braces, cleanings every three months are recommended as well.

Increasing saliva production

1. Eating foods that stimulate production of saliva, like carrots, apples, and celery
2. Using sugarless chewing gum or candy can stimulate saliva production. (Gum or candy with sugar in it must be avoided.)

Other measures

1. Sipping small amounts of water frequently helps to some extent. However, the person doesn't need to drink extra water. The body misinterprets dry mouth as thirst. If the urine is not yellow, the person is drinking enough water.
2. Sipping water or another beverage while eating can be helpful in swallowing food and may improve the taste of food.
3. Sucking on ice chips can help with dry mouth.
4. Using a cool mist humidifier, day and night, and especially in the winter, should be considered because increasing moisture in the air can reduce dry mouth

Over-the-counter products

The person may need to use a group of special products called Biotene (gel, oral rinse, gum, toothpaste, etc.) that are available at all grocery stores and pharmacies and are not expensive. For example:

Biotene Oral Rinse®

Biotene Oral Balance Dry Mouth Relief Moisturizing Gel, Long Lasting Saliva Substitute®

Other saliva substitutes/oral moisturizers like cellulose gum, glycerin (e.g., Oasis moisturizing mouth spray), Salivart®, Oralube®, Xero-lube®, etc.

Xylitol-containing chewing gum may be particularly helpful. Xylitol is a sweetener used in some diabetic products that has special dental benefits. It is believed to reduce dental caries and may also help to remineralize enamel. Xylitol is taken up by bacteria but cannot be used by them, thus decreasing bacterial proliferation.

Chewing gum with xylitol is available in a variety of brands including Spry®, Epic®, and Pur® that are available in local pharmacies and on amazon.com. The gum must be used about six times a day for it to have full benefit. Six pieces of xylitol-containing gum would cost about 66 cents. Xylitol is also available in other forms like Orahealth XyliMelts® that contain timed-release xylitol, Xlear Spry Rain Oral Mist with Xylitol®.