

Dry Mouth

What is dry mouth?

Dry mouth is a feeling that your mouth is dry. The medical term for dry mouth is xerostomia.

What is the cause?

Saliva helps keep your mouth moist. “Spit” or “drool” is saliva. You make saliva all the time to help keep your mouth moist. As you get older, your salivary glands may make less saliva.

A mouth that feels too dry most often happens because of a medicine you are taking. Medicines that can cause a dry mouth include:

- Antidepressants (drugs to treat depression)
- Antihistamines (allergy medicine)
- Antihypertensives (drugs to lower high blood pressure)
- Lipid-lowering drugs (drugs to help lower cholesterol)
- Antiparkinsonian drugs (drugs to treat Parkinson's disease)
- Analgesics (pain medicines)
- Diuretics (drugs to help you get rid of excess fluid)
- Proton pump inhibitors (drugs to treat ulcers or GERD)
- Tranquilizers (drugs to make you calmer)

Dry mouth also can be caused by:

- Disease or infection of a salivary gland
- Dehydration (not having enough fluid in your body, perhaps because you are not drinking enough)
- Breathing through your mouth because of a stuffy nose
- Radiation treatment to the head or neck

The most common disease causing loss of salivary gland secretions is Sjögren’s syndrome. It occurs more often in older adults and is an autoimmune disorder, which means the body attacks and destroys its own tissue.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of dry mouth include:

- A lack of moisture in your mouth
- A sticky feeling in the mouth
- A mild burning feeling in the mouth
- Dry tongue
- Cracked lips
- Tooth decay

- Trouble swallowing or speaking
- A change in how foods taste (food may taste bad) or a loss of taste

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider or dentist can make the diagnosis by talking with you about your symptoms and medical history and by carefully examining your mouth. Be sure to tell your provider what medicines you are taking, including nonprescription drugs and herbal remedies.

Scans of the salivary glands and blood tests are sometimes used to help identify some conditions that cause dry mouth.

How is it treated?

Treatment depends on how severe the problem is and what is causing it:

- You may need to drink more fluids.
- If your dry mouth is the side effect of medicine you are taking, your healthcare provider may decrease the dosage or give you different drug.
- Your healthcare provider may suggest things you can do to make more saliva. For example, it might help to suck on sugar-free candy, such as lemon drops.
- You can get artificial saliva solutions. Usually you buy them as a spray. You also can get gels that soothe dry gums. The gels can be useful as an overnight treatment.
- Your provider may prescribe medicine to help you make more saliva. A couple of medicines that might be tried are pilocarpine or cevimeline.

How can I take care of myself?

Some things you can do to help take care of yourself are:

- Eat a healthy diet and drink plenty of water, unless your healthcare provider has told you to limit your fluids.
- Sip water often, especially when you are talking a lot.
- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugar-free hard candies to help you make more saliva.
- Use a humidifier in your bedroom at night.
- Use lip balm for dry, cracked lips.
- Avoid mouthwashes containing alcohol because they can dry out the mouth.
- Practice good oral hygiene by brushing after meals, flossing regularly, and seeing your dentist at least twice a year (more often if necessary). Good oral hygiene is very important to prevent tooth decay and mouth infections caused by dryness and cracking of the membranes.

You may also want to try special mouthwashes, gum, toothpaste, and moisturizing gels created to help people who have dry mouth. Ask your healthcare provider or dentist about these products.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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