

Dry Mouth

About 10 per cent of the general population and 25 per cent of older people have dry mouth syndrome, which is the lack of sufficient saliva.

A dry mouth is a symptom of an underlying problem, rather than a disease in itself.



Why is saliva important?

A dry mouth significantly increases the risk of tooth decay and other oral diseases. Having enough saliva keeps our mouth healthy.

Saliva is the body's natural defence against tooth decay. Saliva washes away food debris from around the teeth, neutralises harmful acids produced by plaque and foods and drinks, protects the soft tissues of the mouth and prevents fungal infections. Saliva also acts as a vehicle for minerals such as fluoride, calcium and phosphate, which help strengthen tooth enamel. Without adequate saliva to lubricate the mouth, wash away food, and neutralise the acids produced by plaque, your teeth are at risk of extensive decay.

Top 6 Medications Which Cause Dry Mouth

Antihistamines

High blood pressure medication

Sedatives

Decongestants

Analgesics

Antidepressants

What causes of dry mouth syndrome?

Many different conditions, some short term and others long term, can disrupt the production of saliva. These conditions may include:

- drugs and medications – These include antihistamines, high blood pressure medications, sedatives,

decongestants, analgesics and antidepressants. Typically patients on multiple medications will experience dry mouth to varying extents

- dehydration – drinking too little fluid can cause thick saliva and a dry mouth. Other causes of dehydration include medical conditions such as blood loss, chronic diarrhoea or kidney failure
- infection – a bacterial or viral infection of the salivary glands (such as mumps) can cause inflammation and restrict saliva production
- Sjogren's syndrome – is a common autoimmune disease that mainly affects the eyes and salivary glands, but can also affect the sweat glands
- salivary duct obstructions – for example, tiny stones made from saliva minerals may lodge in the salivary ducts and restrict saliva flow
- certain diseases – including AIDS, amyloidosis, cerebral palsy, diabetes, Parkinson's disease, primary biliary cirrhosis and lupus
- nerve problems – the function of the salivary glands is controlled by facial nerves. Injury or surgical damage to these nerves, for example, may reduce saliva production
- some cancer treatments – such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy (if directed at the head or neck) may temporarily reduce the ability of salivary glands to make saliva
- other causes – including habitually breathing through the mouth, for example, in the case of a persistently stuffy nose or blocked sinuses, or hormone changes from pregnancy or menopause.

What problems can a dry mouth cause?

Saliva plays an important role in keeping your mouth healthy. If you have a dry mouth, you may experience a number of other problems too, such as:

- a burning sensation or soreness in your mouth
- dry lips
- bad breath (halitosis)
- a decreased or altered sense of taste
- recurrent mouth infections, such as oral thrush or oral ulcers
- tooth decay and gum disease
- difficulty speaking, eating or swallowing

It's important to maintain good oral hygiene if you have a dry mouth to reduce the risk of dental problems. The mouth and teeth can rapidly deteriorate without saliva

Treating a dry mouth

If you are able to determine what's causing your dry mouth, treating this may improve your symptoms.

For example, if medication is suspected as the cause of your dry mouth, reducing your dose or discussing alternative medications with your GP may be recommended. Changing your medication is not always possible in every instance

Things to try yourself

There are simple measures you can try to help keep your mouth moist. For example, it may help to:

- **increase your fluid intake** – take regular sips of cold water or an unsweetened drink
- **suck on sugar-free sweets or chew sugar-free gum** – this can stimulate your salivary glands to produce more saliva
- **suck on ice cubes** – the ice will melt slowly and moisten your mouth
- **avoid alcohol (including alcohol-based mouthwashes), caffeine and smoking** – these can all make a dry mouth worse
- **using a spray bottle filled with water**



Regularly using a spray bottle filled with water can help relieve the symptoms of dry mouth

Saliva substitutes and stimulants

If the measures above don't help, we may suggest using an artificial saliva substitute to keep your mouth moist. This may come in the form of a spray, gel or lozenge. Use it as often as you need to, including before and during meals.



Both Oral Seven and Biotene make products for dry mouth which are found in most pharmacies or supermarkets