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AGD:FACTSHEET

Compiled for you by the Academy of General Dentistry



DRY MOUTH

What is dry mouth?

Dry mouth (also known as xerostomia) is a condition caused by a decrease in the amount of saliva in the mouth when salivary glands do not work properly. Saliva is a natural defense for teeth and plays a major role in preventing tooth decay by rinsing away food particles, neutralizing harmful acids, providing enzymes to help digest food and keeping oral tissues healthy. A decrease in saliva puts patients at risk for cavities, gum disease and discomfort since foods that are consumed adhere to the teeth longer. Without saliva, you would lose your teeth much faster.

What causes dry mouth?

Dry mouth may be a sign of a serious health condition or may occur when a person is upset or experiences stress. It also can be caused by aging, radiation therapy and chemotherapy, medications, or disease—such as AIDS, diabetes or Sjogren's Syndrome, which causes the body to attack its own moisture producing glands. Even patients with Alzheimer's disease or who suffer a stroke may experience dry mouth. Studies have shown that up to 400 prescription and over-the-counter medications can contribute to symptoms associated with dry mouth. The most common troublemakers are anti-hypertensives, anti-depressants, painkillers, tranquilizers, diuretics, and antihistamines.

What are the effects of dry mouth?

The quality of life of patients suffering from dry mouth is often profoundly impaired. Symptoms include extensive dental decay, infections of the tissues of the mouth, difficulty in speaking, eating and swallowing, ulceration or soreness of the mouth, an altered sense of taste, and difficulty wearing

dentures. It also allows plaque to build up on your teeth faster, leading to a higher risk of cavities. In certain cases, a lack of moisture can make your tongue become very sensitive, causing a condition called burning tongue syndrome.

How can I protect my teeth?

When saliva becomes diminished, your teeth become very susceptible to decay. The first line of defense should be good oral hygiene and nutritional habits, increased water intake and a supplement fluoride treatment. Having your general dentist apply sealants can further protect against cavities. Sealants, however, can only be applied to teeth not currently decayed or filled.

How can my general dentist help?

Your dentist will want to know if you have difficulty swallowing, difficulty with speech, oral soreness or a dry throat. Help your dentist diagnose the problem by recognizing the symptoms associated with dry mouth. If you have any questions about this condition, ask your dentist.

To ease dry mouth pain:

- Brush and floss twice a day
- Chew sugarless gum
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine
- Avoid smoking
- Avoid overly salty foods
- Drink plenty of water
- Avoid citrus juices (tomato, orange, grapefruit)
- Avoid dry foods, such as toast or crackers
- Use over-the-counter moisture replacement therapies
- Visit the dentist regularly
- Use supplement fluorides

Does AGD offer any resources for my family and me?

Yes! Check out AGD's Web site, www.agd.org, to search more than 300 oral health topics, post a dental question, sign up for e-newsletters or find an AGD dentist. Or, calling 1.877.2X.A.YEAR (1.877.292.9327) will put you in touch with an operator who will provide the names, addresses and phone numbers of AGD members.



RESOURCES

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