

# ORAL HEALTH & AGING



INFORMATION FOR CAREGIVERS



## DRY MOUTH & OLDER ADULTS

Dry mouth is the feeling that there is not enough saliva in the mouth. Common causes of dry mouth in older adults include side effects of certain medications and dehydration, when you lose more fluid than you take in.

Dry mouth can make it hard to chew, swallow, or even talk. Having less saliva also increases the risk of developing tooth decay or fungal (yeast) infections in the mouth since saliva helps keep harmful germs in check.

Dentures can become uncomfortable and may not fit as well if the mouth is dry. And without enough saliva, dentures can rub against the gums or the roof of the mouth and cause sore spots. In addition, fungal infections can develop under the dentures.

It is important to know that dry mouth is not part of the aging process itself. However, many older adults take medications that can dry out the mouth, and taking more than one of these can make dry mouth even worse. For example, medicines for high blood pressure, depression, and bladder-control problems often cause dry mouth. (Do not make any changes to your medications, though, without first talking to your physician.)

### DID YOU KNOW?

Some people feel they have dry mouth even if their salivary glands are working correctly. People with certain conditions, such as Alzheimer's disease or those who have suffered a stroke, may not be able to feel wetness in their mouths.

### WHAT CAUSES DRY MOUTH?

- **Side effects of some medicines.** Hundreds of medicines can cause the salivary glands to make less saliva.
- **Dehydration.** Older adults are more prone to dehydration than younger people.
- **Disease.** Diabetes, Sjögren's disease, and HIV/AIDS can all cause dry mouth.
- **Radiation therapy.** The salivary glands can be damaged if they are exposed to radiation during cancer treatment.
- **Chemotherapy.** Drugs used to treat cancer can make saliva thicker, causing the mouth to feel dry.
- **Nerve damage.** Injury to the head or neck can damage the nerves that tell salivary glands to make saliva.

## WHAT IF THE PERSON YOU CARE FOR HAS DRY MOUTH?

Make sure he or she visits a dentist or physician who can help determine what is causing the dry mouth and suggest appropriate treatments. If medications are causing dry mouth, the dentist or physician might advise changing medications or adjusting the dosages. Other treatments might include a medicine that helps the salivary glands work better and artificial saliva to keep the mouth wet.

### YOU MAY ALSO SUGGEST THE PERSON YOU CARE FOR DO THE FOLLOWING:

- Sip water or sugarless drinks often, especially during meals. This will make chewing and swallowing easier. It may also improve the taste of food.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine, such as coffee, tea, and some sodas. Caffeine can dry out the mouth.
- Chew sugarless gum or suck on sugarless hard candy to stimulate saliva flow; citrus, cinnamon, or mint-flavored candies are good choices. Some sugarless chewing gums and candies contain xylitol and *may* help prevent cavities.
- Don't use tobacco or alcohol. They dry out the mouth.

- Be aware that spicy or salty foods may cause pain in a dry mouth.

- Use a humidifier at night.

### TO MAINTAIN GOOD ORAL HEALTH, HE OR SHE SHOULD ALSO:

- Gently brush at least twice a day with fluoride toothpaste.
- Floss regularly.
- Avoid sticky, sugary foods, or brush immediately after eating them.
- Rinse with water after using an inhaler or taking any syrup-based medicines.
- Select sugarless cough drops, vitamins, and antacid tablets.
- Use a fluoride mouth rinse that does not contain alcohol.

**VISIT THE  
DENTIST  
REGULARLY**

The person you care for should visit the dentist even if there are no remaining natural teeth. And see the dentist right away about any changes in the mouth such as sores, pain, swelling, or bleeding gums.

National Institute of Dental and Craniofacial Research • 1-866-232-4528 • [www.nidcr.nih.gov](http://www.nidcr.nih.gov)  
*This information is not copyrighted. Make as many photocopies as you need.*