

Avoid dental problems by preventing dry mouth

By Shawnell Miller

Many people suffer from dry mouth and do not even realize it. Chronic dry mouth can be uncomfortable and can lead to dental problems like cavities and gum disease. It can also cause problems in tasting, chewing, swallowing and speaking.

Dry mouth can also be a sign of certain diseases like diabetes. It is also a common side effect of many medications and certain medical treatments like radiation and chemotherapy.

People develop dry mouth when the salivary glands in the mouth do not make enough saliva. Saliva helps prevent cavities by neutralizing the acids and fighting bacteria in our mouth after eating and drinking. It helps strengthen teeth because it contains calcium, fluoride and phosphate. Saliva also contains special enzymes that help with digestion and swallowing.

Another benefit of saliva is that it helps rinse away food after eating. When food is allowed to remain on and between the teeth for long periods of time, it supplies the bacteria something to feed on, increasing the risk of more cavities and gum disease.

When we eat sugar, the bacteria in our mouth thrive and produce acid. Saliva helps neutralize these cavity-causing acids, but you should avoid eating sugar, especially between meals.

Signs and symptoms of dry mouth include:

- A sticky, dry feeling in the mouth or throat
- Trouble chewing, swallowing, tasting or speaking
- Cracked lips
- Mouth sores
- An infection or burning feeling in the mouth
- A dry and or rough tongue that may have deep fissures
- Thick and stringy appearance to saliva

Protect your mouth

If you think you may be suffering from dry mouth, reach out to your doctor or dentist. Treatment may depend on what is causing the dry mouth.

Your doctor may adjust your medication or give you a medicine that helps the gland produce more saliva. Your doctor or dentist may have you use an artificial saliva substitute to help keep your mouth moist and provide you with similar benefits as your own saliva. Your dentist may put you on a prescription strength fluoride toothpaste and recommend in office fluoride treatments to help prevent cavities during the times you are suffering from dry mouth.

Good home oral health care is essential when the mouth is dry. Brush your teeth at least twice a day. Floss daily to clean between the teeth. Water flossers can be beneficial to remove food from between the teeth, which is common in people with dry mouth. Use a toothpaste with fluoride to help aid in strengthening your teeth.

You can also sip water often. However, remember that water doesn't replace saliva. It is important to incorporate other ways to get your saliva flowing so that you can protect your mouth.

Other ways to prevent dry mouth:

- Chew sugar-free gum or suck on sugar-free hard candies.
- Avoid drinks with caffeine, like coffee and soda.
- Do not use tobacco or alcohol as they dry out the mouth.
- If the air is dry, a humidifier at night may be helpful.
- Visit your dentist for check-ups and cleanings at least twice a year.

With a little prevention and attention to symptoms, you can help prevent the damage from dry mouth.

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