

Dry mouth



Information for patients

Oral Medicine



What are the aims of this leaflet?

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about dry mouth (xerostomia). It tells you what causes it, the potential complications, how it is diagnosed and managed and where you can find out more information.

What are the most common causes of dry mouth?

A dry mouth is rarely a sign of anything serious. The most common causes are:

- **Medications:** several medications have been reported to cause dry mouth sensation. Examples include medications for high blood pressure, depression, bladder problems, allergies and cancer among many others. You can visit <https://www.medicines.org.uk> to search for your medicine and see if dry mouth is a side effect.
- **Breathing through your mouth:** this can happen during the day and night or when you have a blocked nose.
- **Cancer treatment with radiotherapy and chemotherapy:** salivary glands can be permanently damaged if they are exposed to radiation therapy for cancer in the head and neck area. Chemotherapy drugs can also change the nature of saliva and the amount produced.
- **Diseases:** diabetes, Sjögren's syndrome, sarcoidosis, HIV/AIDS and hepatitis C are associated with dry mouth.
- **Anxiety:** it is common for your mouth to become dry if you are feeling anxious.
- **Lifestyle and habits:** smoking and excessive consumption of alcohol, as well as inadequate fluid intake, can lead to the sensation of a dry mouth.
- **Age:** dry mouth is most common among the elderly.



Figures 1 and 2- Dry mouth

What are the consequences of having a dry mouth?

Saliva plays a significant role in maintaining oral health. When saliva flow is reduced it makes the mouth more prone to dental caries (tooth decay), gum disease and oral infections such as oral candidosis (thrush).

Dry mouth sensation can be unpleasant and can negatively affect taste, chewing, swallowing and speech. The mouth can become sore and lips cracked. Dentures can become uncomfortable to wear and there could be bad breath. You may wake up during the night due to the dryness.

How is dry mouth diagnosed?

Salivary flow tests (to measure the amount of saliva you produce), blood tests and other investigations may be required.

How is dry mouth managed?

There are several means that may help you ease the dry mouth sensation. The most common are:

- 1. Drinking enough water and sipping water and other non-sugary fluids throughout the day and whilst eating.**
- 2. Replacing missing saliva with saliva substitutes.**

A number of saliva substitutes (artificial saliva) are available as a mouthwash, spray or gel (eg. Biotène, Oralbalance, Glandosane, BioXtra, AS Saliva Orthana, Saliveze), alcohol-free mouthrinses (BioXtra and Biotène), or moisturising gels (BioXtra). They are available directly from a pharmacy but can sometimes also be prescribed.



Figure 3 - Saliva substitutes

3. Stimulating saliva with:

- Sugar-free chewing gum and lozenges
- Pastilles to help stimulate saliva are available directly from pharmacies but can sometimes also be prescribed.
- Medications that stimulate salivary glands, such as Pilocarpine, are sometimes used for patients with Sjogren's syndrome or following radiotherapy for head and neck cancers. However, Pilocarpine has side effects and it cannot be used for all patients.
- Gentle daily massaging of the parotid glands (located in front and beneath the ears) may help to increase saliva (Figure 4).

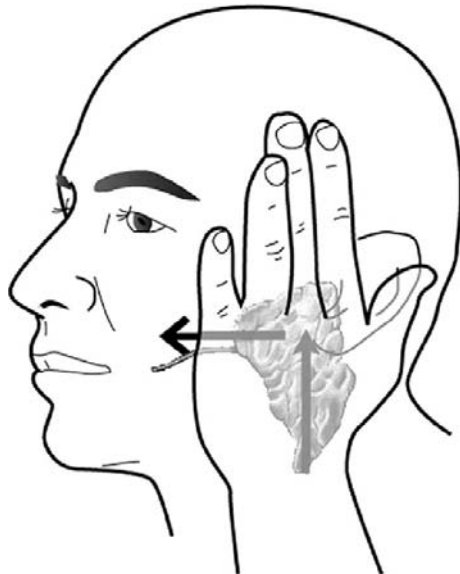


Figure 4 - How to massage the parotid glands

4. Avoiding anything that may worsen dryness, such as:

- Alcohol (including in mouthwashes).
- Caffeine (coffees and other drinks containing caffeine.)

5. Protecting against dental caries (tooth decay) by:

- Avoiding sugary foods and drinks and acidic fizzy drinks.
- Keeping to a good oral hygiene routine.
- Having regular dental check-ups and professional cleanings by dental hygienists.
- Your dentist may recommend specific toothpastes, mouthwashes and gels rich in fluoride.

6. Protecting against fungal infections (thrush), gum disease and bad breath by:

- Keeping your mouth very clean.
- Keeping your mouth as moist as possible.
- Rinsing regularly with mouthwashes (such as Corsodyl, Eludril) or triclosan (Plax).
- Brushing or scraping your tongue.
- Keeping dentures out at night.
- Disinfecting dentures in a suitable denture cleaner.
- Using antifungal treatments for oral thrush, if needed.

7. Protecting your lips:

- With a lip balm or petroleum jelly (Vaseline).

Other sources of information

NHS Website:

- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dry-mouth/>

Oral Health Foundation website:

- <https://www.dentalhealth.org/dry-mouth>



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