

Dry Mouth

Introduction

Dry mouth has various causes. Simple measures such as drinking frequent sips of water, sucking ice cubes and chewing sugar-free gum will often help and be all that is needed in many cases. Artificial saliva or medication to stimulate the salivary glands are sometimes used.

What are the causes of a dry mouth?

A dry mouth is not a diagnosis in itself. It is a symptom and there are various causes which include

- **Medication** - various drugs can cause a dry mouth as a side-effect. For example, tricyclic antidepressants, antihistamines, antimuscarinic drugs, some antiepileptic drugs, some antipsychotics, beta-blockers, and diuretics ('water tablets'). Many of these drugs cause a dry mouth by affecting the salivary glands which reduce the amount of saliva that these glands make.
- **Radiotherapy** to the head or neck. The radiotherapy can damage the salivary glands.
- **Mouth breathing** - which can be due to a blocked nose or other causes.
- **Anxiety**
- **Dehydration** (low body fluid). This may occur for many reasons, but you will usually be quite ill with fever or other symptoms if you are dehydrated.
- **Sjögren's Syndrome** - this is a condition which can affect various parts of the body including the joints (which can cause arthritis), the salivary glands (which can cause a dry mouth), and the tear glands (which can cause dry eyes).

What are the treatments for a dry mouth?

If possible, treat any underlying cause - in some cases, it may be possible to treat the underlying cause. For example -

- If a drug is causing the dry mouth as a side-effect, it may be possible to change to a different drug, or to reduce the dose.
- Dehydration, a blocked nose, and anxiety can often be treated.

Practical measures - whatever the cause, the following will often help.

- Take frequent sips or sprays of cold water. Always have a glass of water next to you when you go to bed.
- Suck ice-cubes.
- Sugar-free chewing gum is often helpful.
- Eating pineapple chunks or partly frozen melon is often soothing and helpful.

- Some people find that it helps to suck boiled sweets. (But, sugary or acid sweets may not be good for your teeth.)
- Consider reducing or cutting out caffeine and alcohol which have a diuretic effect. (This means that they can make you pass out more urine which can be dehydrating.) Caffeine occurs in tea, coffee, cola and other drinks. It is also part of some drugs.
- You can apply petroleum jelly to your lips to prevent drying and cracking.

Artificial saliva - if the above measures are not adequate, then your doctor may prescribe a spray or gel which acts as a substitute for saliva. Each dose only lasts a short time and so they need to be used frequently. Some people find artificial saliva products more helpful than others