

The Drought Within: Dry Mouth And Its Effects

It is not a particularly nice feeling to wake up with a dry and sticky feeling in your mouth. It's annoying and can possibly lead to a lot of different complications once left untreated. But what really is dry mouth?

Dry mouth

More commonly called as xerostomia by medical professionals, dry mouth is basically a condition where there is a lack of saliva in the oral cavity. It is colloquially called pasties or cottonmouth. In itself, it is not a disease, but rather a possible symptom of some other condition.

Causes:

1. Medications. Some medications may have side effects of dry mouth. Prescription medications for depression, anxiety, pain; and illicit drugs like cannabis and methamphetamines may cause dry mouth.
2. Radiation therapy. This procedure may affect the salivary glands and its functions.
3. Diseases and infections. Dry mouth can be a side effect of underlying medical conditions and infections like: Sjögren's syndrome, HIV/AIDS, Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, anaemia, cystic fibrosis, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension, Parkinson's disease, stroke, and mumps.
4. Depression and anxiety. Studies have shown that people who are depressed and/or have anxiety disorders generally have low rates of salivary flow.
5. Trauma to the salivary glands, or the surrounding nerves and ducts. This causes disruption to the salivary glands' functionality and may cause lesser saliva production.
6. Dehydration. Water loss in the body may cause dry mouth.
7. Too much mouth breathing. Air entering through the mouth into the throat dries up the saliva in the oral cavity.
8. Too much physical activity. A lot of elderly people say that they get dry mouth after engaging in physical activity or staying under the sun for quite a while.
9. Aging. The body produces less and less saliva as we grow old.

Signs and Symptoms

- Difficulty eating, speaking, and swallowing. This is due to the lack of saliva in the mouth. Our saliva is meant to protect and lubricate the oral cavity. A shortage in saliva may mean loss of lubrication and therefore make it difficult for movement during eating, swallowing and speaking.
- Taste disorders. Scientifically called dysgeusia, this occurs when dry mouth is caused by damaged salivary glands, nerves and ducts. Sufferers may describe their food as having either a really strong taste, a "wrong" taste, or having no taste at all.
- Tongue pain. This is characterised by having a burning or tingling sensation on the lips, tongue or
- Increased thirst. Since the oral cavity has lost its natural lubricant, the body starts craving for more fluid intake.
- Mouth sores. Especially within the corners of the mouth.
- A sticky, dry feeling in the mouth and throat.
- A dry, red, raw tongue.
- Hoarseness, dry nasal passages and sore throat.
- Bad breath.

Treatment

At the moment, a final cure for dry mouth is not possible. However, treatment is mainly for keeping the teeth and the oral cavity in good shape and relieving the feeling of dryness in the mouth.

- Make constant visits to the dentist for oral check up and prophylaxis.
- Pay close attention to your oral hygiene.
- If the use of antihistamines or decongestants is required, check for those that don't cause dry mouth.
- Increase fluid intake.
- Chew on medicated gum.
- Use carboxymethyl cellulose saliva substitute as a mouthwash.

Complications:

Leaving xerostomia untreated may lead to several other complications, simple and otherwise.

1. Gingivitis. (inflammation of the gums)
2. Tooth decay.
3. Mouth infections. (oral candidiasis or yeast infection)

4. Halitosis. (bad breath)

People may consider dry mouth an ordinary occurrence and put off having it checked for later. This is not a good idea because as it was mentioned earlier in this article, this may already be warning signs of certain diseases. Also, if left untreated, it may start causing you problems. If you start noticing any of the symptoms mentioned above, go have a talk with your doctor. Immediate action may save you from having more trouble in the future.

About the Author

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