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Is it dry in here?

Dry mouth is a side effect to different physical stressors. *By Dr. Susan Maples*

Q: I have a very dry mouth and I just hate it. I know it is causing my cavity problem too. What can I do?

A: Dry mouth, also called Xerostomia, is a symptom, not a specific disorder. In other words, it is a side effect of several different physical stressors.

Saliva is our best friend—it bathes and lubricates the mouth, helps digest foods, prevents tooth decay and aids in speech and swallowing. When saliva flow slows down you definitely know it! A sticky mouth and bad breath are just the beginning. Tooth decay can rage like wild fire, often giving way to a feeling of helplessness and/or financial distress.

The most common cause of reduced saliva production is prescription medications. Get this--Over 400 meds have dry mouth as a common side effect! These include diuretics, blood pressure meds, antidepressants, pain meds (especially narcotics), antihistamines, and decongestants. If you suspect your medications are the root cause of your xerostomia, read the package insert. Then bring it to the attention of your prescribing physician or dentist. Often there are suitable substitutes and by matching the right pill with the right person you can regain healthy lubrication.

Another cause of this annoying condition is radiation cancer treatment to the head or neck, which destroys salivary gland tissue, at least temporarily. Autoimmune disturbances such as Diabetes or Sjogren's Syndrome can also be to blame, as well as changes in hormone levels like during menopause.

How do you spell relief? There is no perfect remedy. Increasing your water intake helps a bit. There are over-the-counter saliva substitutes. Ask your hospital pharmacist which one patients seem to prefer. Sugar free candy or gum can stimulate saliva flow. For protection from decalcification and decay, I recommend fluoride treatments (professional and home) as well as MI paste. There is one unique toothpaste called Squigle that combines xylitol (a known enamel re-builder) and fluoride. It is not readily available over the counter but if you are undergoing radiation treatment or suffer from dry mouth decay, ask your dentist or hospital pharmacist to order it for you.

Daily home care is critically important for protecting a dry mouth from cavities and gum disease, since any plaque you miss gets no cleansing assistance from saliva. Always alert your dentist if you develop dry mouth, and let him or her be your investigator and health advocate.

