

## **Why is saliva important for oral health?**

Saliva may seem just like water, but that is far from true. Saliva contains hundreds of the body's "natural medicines" and parts of your immune system designed to keep your mouth healthy. Saliva regulates the microorganisms ("germs") that cause oral infections and saliva makes speaking, chewing, and swallowing more comfortable. Reduction in the amount of saliva, known as xerostomia, mostly occurs as a side-effect of medications, chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and some diseases may also cause your glands to produce less saliva. It is important that your dentist find out the cause of your dry mouth so you may be treated properly. Many people do not know they have xerostomia until they lose about half of their saliva at which point they start to feel that their mouth is dry.

## **How do I manage mouth dryness?**

**Oral lubricants** are products that are designed to replace lost saliva. They are sometimes called saliva substitutes or "artificial saliva" but should be thought of as oral lubricants. Unfortunately, science has yet to produce anything that can replace all the functions of saliva but many people find that oral lubricants make their mouths feel more comfortable. Several oral lubricants come in a small spray bottle that can conveniently be carried in a purse or pocket. Some people prefer to just use water. Your dentist can suggest which product may be most helpful for your particular situation.

## **How may I improve my ability to eat when my mouth is dry?**

Lack of adequate lubrication can make it difficult to chew and swallow foods, especially dry foods, especial for people that wear dentures. The following tips can help:

- Sip water frequently while eating.
- Add gravies and sauces to dry foods.
- Use an oral lubricant a few minutes before eating. Be sure to remove your dentures before using the lubricant so it can coat the parts of the gums that support the dentures, and then place the dentures back in the mouth.

## **How does a dry mouth affect denture fit?**

Saliva helps your denture hold onto the gums and stay in place, what dentists call “retention”. When your mouth is dry the denture tends to feel loose. This is made worse when the supporting tissues under your dentures continue to shrink throughout the rest of your life. The amount of shrinkage varies from person to person. As the gums shrink, the denture and the gums become mismatched. This happens little by little, but even a small change in the fit of the denture is more noticeable when the mouth is dry. Most people notice this more often with the lower denture. The size and shape of the upper gums usually make wearing an upper denture easier.

As shrinkage of gums occurs, you may need to have your denture remade or relined more frequently than someone who has enough saliva. A reline is a procedure in which additional denture material is added to the part of the denture that contacts the gums so that the denture once again closely conforms to the shape of the mouth. Even with a “perfect fit,” you may still experience some looseness due to the lack of saliva to help hold the denture in place. A denture adhesive may be of help in this case. There are many types of

adhesives available, and your dentist can offer advice on which one best fits your needs.

In addition to a feeling of increased looseness, you may have more sore spots under your denture due to reduced saliva. Without the saliva to provide lubrication between your denture and gums, the increased friction from the dry denture rubs a sore. Your dentist should first check to be sure the denture fits as well as possible. If nothing needs to be done to the denture, an oral lubricant or denture adhesive may help. Additionally, your dentist may talk with you about consideration of implants to help support or retain your denture. Implants may greatly improve denture satisfaction, however, not everyone is a candidate for implants. Your dentist will be able to talk with you about your options.

### **What kind of infections are associated with a dry mouth?**

Since saliva helps regulate the microorganisms (germs) in the mouth, a person with dry mouth is more prone to oral infections. In denture wearers, Candida, a yeast-like fungus, is a frequent cause of infections. One such infection is **denture stomatitis**. Denture stomatitis is more common under the upper denture, especially in those with dry mouth who wear their denture during sleep. Most cases do not cause enough pain to be noticed so they may exist for years. It is very important to eliminate denture stomatitis if new dentures are to be made. This may require treatment with both tissue conditioners and antifungal medications. Another condition usually caused by Candida is **angular cheilitis**, recurrent sores that occur at the corners of the mouth. Antifungal medications are also of help with this condition. Talk to your dentist to confirm you understand when and how to use your antifungal medication because many people do not use these medications correctly.

## **How does dry mouth affect my remaining natural teeth?**

If you have some natural teeth, tooth decay is the most frequent cause of tooth loss in older adults who have a dry mouth. Without saliva to regulate the germs that cause decay, they can grow in number and cause more damage. Your dentist may recommend toothpastes made for people with dry mouth and prescription-strength fluoride toothpastes or gels. Ask your dentist or dental hygienist for ways to prevent tooth decay and make sure that you see your dentist regularly so that any problems may be identified and managed early.

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