

Talking with Patients

Xerostomia (Dry Mouth)

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WHAT IS IT?

Xerostomia, or “dry mouth,” is a condition characterized by the substantial reduction of the saliva flow in the mouth. Dry mouth can affect one’s ability to chew, swallow, and talk. Reduced saliva flow can be very detrimental to oral health, as individuals with dry mouth are prone to mouth infections and typically experience a dramatic increase in tooth decay. Dry mouth may be experienced occasionally when someone is nervous or stressed; but persisting for long periods of time, dry mouth might indicate an underlying disease such as uncontrolled diabetes, Parkinson’s disease, or hepatitis C.

Many current medications can cause xerostomia, including antidepressants, antihypertensives, antihistamines, tranquilizers, analgesics, diuretics, etc. Xerostomia also can be a result of head and neck radiation therapy, immunosuppressive therapy, and autoimmune diseases such as AIDS and Sjögren’s syndrome.

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED AND TREATED?

Although xerostomia can affect people of any age group, it most commonly affects the elderly because they are more likely to be taking medications that cause dry mouth. It is estimated that approximately 20% of the elderly suffer from xerostomia.¹

Salivary flow rates can be assessed by your dentist, who also can diagnose infections and/or tooth decay that might be a result of dry mouth. The treatment for xerostomia relies heavily on the identification of its underlying cause. Because medication is a common cause of xerostomia, the patient’s physician often participates in the management of the condition.

When the underlying cause can not be properly addressed, symptomatic treatment of dry mouth includes measures to stimulate and increase saliva flow. Currently, many over-the-counter products are available that relieve the symptoms of dry

mouth. These include saliva stimulants and saliva substitutes. Your dentist and/or physician also can prescribe medication for the treatment of dry mouth.

Prevention and treatment of mouth infections and tooth decay are a big part of the management of patients with dry mouth.

CONCLUSIONS

Dry mouth is a relatively common condition that can significantly affect the patient’s quality of life. Because dry mouth can cause mouth infections and tooth decay, it also can affect the person’s overall health due to poor nutrition. Dry mouth is a common side effect of many medications, but also can be the manifestation of an underlying disease. Proper diagnosis and management can minimize dry mouth and/or its effects on oral and general health.

REFERENCE

1. Astor FC, Hanft KL, Ciocon JO. Xerostomia: a prevalent condition in the elderly. *Ear Nose Throat J* 1999;78:476–9.

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