

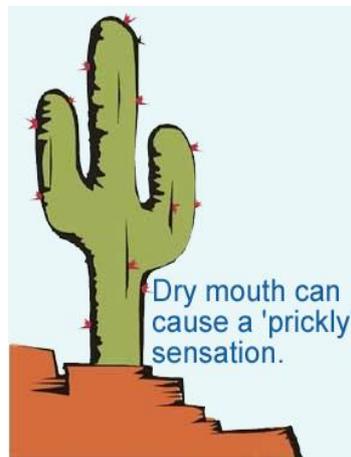
# Dry Mouth

## What is dry mouth?

Your mouth needs saliva to be able to work properly. Saliva keeps your mouth moist, and it helps to break down your food and helps you to swallow. It also acts as a cleanser. It is constantly washing around your mouth and teeth, fighting [decay](#) and helping to keep your teeth clean. Dry mouth or 'xerostomia' is a condition which affects the flow of saliva, causing your mouth to feel dry.

## How can I tell I have it?

There are several symptoms to look out for. The most obvious is, of course, a dry mouth. Some people feel that their saliva has become thick and sticky, making it difficult to speak or swallow. Some people also have a 'prickly' or burning sensation in their mouth and become sensitive to certain foods. The mouth can become sore and there is a higher risk of tooth decay and [gum disease](#). In some cases, the mouth can also become red and shiny. If you are suffering from any of these symptoms it doesn't necessarily mean that you have dry mouth, but it may be best to talk to your dentist or doctor about it.



## What can cause it?

Dry mouth can be a symptom of many different problems and can happen as you get older. Quite often it is a side effect of medication, especially heart, blood pressure and depression tablets. Your doctor, chemist or dentist should be able to tell you whether your medication can cause problems. Dry mouth can also be caused by medical treatment such as radiotherapy, or surgery to the head or neck.

In some cases, dry mouth can be a direct result of a medical condition (for example diabetes, lupus, Sjogren's syndrome and blocked salivary glands).

## Are women more likely to get dry mouth?

Women who are going through the menopause ('change of life') may suffer from dry mouth. Women who have had their menopause and are taking Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) may also find they suffer from dry mouth. If you are taking medication and have any of the symptoms of dry mouth, talk to your doctor to see whether the tablets could be altered.

## Can I prevent it?

Unfortunately there seems to be no way of actually preventing the problem, although there are products to ease the symptoms.

## What problems can it cause?

Saliva helps to cancel out the acid that can attack your teeth, and is a very important part of your dental health. Saliva helps to break down food while you are chewing, allowing you to swallow more easily. Some people find that they have problems with swallowing when their saliva flow is affected.

Saliva is also very important in the fight against tooth decay. It helps to fight the bacteria that form dental

plaque and cause tooth decay and gum disease. Plaque is the thin, sticky film that keeps forming on your teeth.

Having less saliva can also affect the taste of food and makes it harder to eat drier foods. Sometimes it can affect your speech and it makes people more likely to have [bad breath](#).

#### **What products are there to help?**

There are a number of products designed to provide moisture and comfort. These are usually gels or sprays. Some have extra ingredients which may help prevent tooth and gum problems. There are also special products to help with your day-to-day [oral hygiene](#) (for example toothpastes and mouth rinses).

#### **What can my dentist do to help prevent the problems caused by dry mouth?**

Your dentist won't be able to help with the cause of dry mouth. But by helping you keep your mouth clean and by using fluoride they can, in many cases, help to delay the start of dental decay. Your dentist or [hygienist](#) will be able to give you advice about your [diet](#) and tell you how to care for your teeth and gums properly.

#### **What toothpaste should I use?**

It is important to use a toothpaste containing at least 1350 to 1500ppm (parts per million) of [fluoride](#). A 'total care' toothpaste may be best as these contain antibacterial agents and other ingredients to control the build-up of plaque.

Some products contain Sodium Lauryl Sulphate, and some people with dry mouth find this can irritate the mouth and make the condition worse.

#### **How often should I visit my dentist?**

Because you have a higher risk of tooth decay and gum disease with dry mouth, and because these can get worse more quickly than usual, it is important to visit your dentist regularly. Your dentist will tell you how often you should visit.

#### **What could I try to help relieve the symptoms of dry mouth?**

There are different ways of relieving the symptoms of dry mouth. Some people find that sipping water, or sucking sugar-free sweets, helps in the short term. It is **very** important to use sugar-free products, as dry mouth can make you more likely to have tooth decay. Chewing [sugar-free gum](#) can also help as it encourages your mouth to make saliva. Your dentist might recommend products such as rinses, gels, pastes and lozenges which you can get from the chemist.