

Dealing with dry mouth

Having difficulty speaking, eating and swallowing? Under stress, upset or taking medications? These combinations place people at risk for a painful condition known as dry mouth.

Dry mouth, also known as xerostomia, is caused by a decrease in amount of saliva in the mouth when salivary glands do not work properly. Saliva, the mouth's natural defense mechanism, plays an important role in preventing tooth decay by rinsing away food particles, neutralizing harmful acids, digesting food and keeping oral tissues healthy.

While dry mouth may be a sign of a serious health condition, it can also be caused by aging, radiation therapy and chemotherapy, medications or disease.

Over 400 prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs are known

to cause dry mouth. Others affected by this disease include patients with autoimmune disease, diabetics, cancer of the salivary glands, alcoholics and people who do not drink enough water.

Sufferers may experience extensive dental decay, infections of the tissues of the mouth, difficulty in speaking, eating and swallowing, mouth sores, an altered sense of taste and difficulty wearing dentures.

A dentist can help identify medications that may be responsible for causing dry mouth. They may recommend home remedies such as sucking on ice chips, sugar-free hard candy or chewing gum, and rinsing with a mixture of baking soda and water.

Applying sealants to teeth can help protect against cavities caused by tooth decay.

If the problem becomes serious, a dentist can prescribe medi-

cation to help treat the problem. Some ways to ease dry mouth are: brush and floss twice per day, chew sugarless gum, drink plenty of water and visit a dentist regularly.

Patients should also avoid using alcohol, caffeine, smoking, overly salty foods, citrus juices (tomato, orange and grapefruit),

over-the-counter medications, placement therapies, and dry foods, such as toast or crackers.

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