

# Dry Mouth



Xerostomia is the medical term for a dry mouth due to lack of saliva. Dry mouth can cause difficulty eating and talking and can also lead to halitosis (**bad breath**). Without saliva to lubricate the mouth, wash away food particles, balance the acidity of the mouth, and remineralize the teeth, **cavities** and other infections can easily form.

Seniors are particularly susceptible to dry mouth because they often take multiple medications to control diseases they have developed throughout their lifetime. Seniors are also more likely to have teeth with exposed roots due to a number of factors including, but not limited to their age, tobacco use, and oral hygiene habits. Root surfaces are more prone to cavities because they do not have enamel to protect them. The combination of exposed root surfaces and dry mouth increases the likelihood of cavities forming.

## How do you know you have dry mouth?

Surprisingly, you can have this condition without realizing it! If your mouth or throat feels sticky or dry, if your lips crack easily, if you frequently have sores or sore spots in your mouth or if your tongue is red, dry and perhaps feels tingly, you may be experiencing the symptoms of dry mouth.

## Causes of Dry Mouth

**Medication:** Medication is the most common cause of dry mouth; over 400 common prescriptions and over-the-counter drugs are known to cause dry mouth.

**Radiation and Chemotherapy:** Individuals who undergo radiation or chemo-therapy for head and neck cancers experience xerostomia. The salivary glands can be permanently damaged and saliva can be reduced and/or its consistency changed.

**Disease:** Dry mouth may be a sign of an underlying disease such as diabetes or Sjögren’s syndrome, a disorder in which immune cells attack and destroy the tear and saliva glands.

**Substance Abuse:** Dry mouth is a common symptom of substance abuse as many drugs reduce saliva production. Abusers tend to have a higher incidence of cavities and gum disease, and in the case of methamphetamine users, often develop a condition known as “**meth mouth**”.

## Solutions

Although there is no cure for xerostomia, there are steps you can take to help manage this condition. Drink plenty of water and/or sugar free beverages. Chew sugar-free gum or suck on sugar-free mints containing **xylitol**; these stimulate saliva production and xylitol helps protect teeth against cavities. Avoid tobacco, caffeine, and alcohol. If you use mouthwash, be sure it is alcohol free. Use a saliva replacement gel to help lubricate your mouth; they are available at drug stores. Talk to your physician about changing your medications to ones that do not cause dry mouth.

Finally, be sure to visit your CDA member dentist regularly so he or she can provide protective fluoride treatments and other care essential to keeping your teeth and mouth healthy.



Cavities on exposed roots



Tongue affected by dry mouth