

Have you ever found yourself laughing at a TV commercial for a prescription or over-the-counter drug where the list of potential side effects seems to take up more time in the commercial than the actual ad? Or chuckled at one of those commercial spoofs on *Saturday Night Live* that mockingly lists all the hazardous side effects of taking XYZ drug? Sure, those are funny, but the reality is that a number of medications on the market today can have a negative impact on your oral health because of a potential side effect that is no joke: dry mouth.

You may think that dry mouth is just a harmless nuisance, but if left untreated, it can lead to extensive tooth decay, mouth sores, and oral infections. Nearly 50 percent of all Americans and 90 percent of adults over the age of 65 take at least one prescription medication every day, including many that produce dry mouth, according to the American Dental Association (ADA). And because of the number of medications they routinely take, the elderly are at high risk for developing dry mouth.

Also known by its clinical name "xerostomia," dry mouth occurs when there is an inadequate flow of saliva, which does more than just lubricate the mouth: Saliva washes away food particles and bacteria, helping to prevent tooth decay. When left untreated, xerostomia can lead to irritation of the soft tissues in the mouth, which can make them inflamed and more susceptible to infection, such as periodontal (gum) disease. Dry mouth can also make it uncomfortable to wear full dentures because the lack of saliva keeps them from adhering properly. Insufficient saliva may also result in bad breath, painful denture sores, dry and cracked lips, and increased risks of oral infection.

According to the ADA, more than 500 medications can contribute to xerostomia, including antihistamines, antihypertensive medications, decongestants, pain medications, diuretics, and antidepressants. Dry mouth can also result from radiation treatment for head-and-neck cancers, as well as occur as a symptom of a

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salivary gland disease or autoimmune disease, such as diabetes. But experts agree that the primary cause of dry mouth is the use of medications.



Common symptoms of dry mouth include: trouble eating, speaking, and chewing; burning sensations; or a frequent need to sip water while eating.

"Dry mouth becomes a problem when symptoms occur all or most of the time, and [it] can cause serious problems for your oral health," says Dr. Matthew Messina, ADA consumer advisor. "Drying irritates the soft tissues in the mouth, which can make them inflamed and more susceptible to infection."

If you suffer from chronic dry mouth, you should contact your dentist and be sure to indicate all medications you are taking and any health conditions you may have that could be contributing to your oral dryness. Your dentist may recommend using saliva substitutes or oral moisturizers. Some other tips to temporarily alleviate the symptoms of xerostomia include increasing fluid intake, chewing sugarless gum, taking frequent sips of water, or sucking on ice chips. Also, avoiding tobacco and caffeinated, alcoholic, and carbonated beverages may prove helpful.

If you think that one or more of your medications is causing oral dryness, you may also want to speak with your pharmacist. "In some cases, a different medication can be provided or your dosage modified to alleviate dry mouth symptoms," says Thomas Menighan, executive vice president and chief executive officer of the American Pharmacists Association.

When it comes to your oral health, dry mouth is no laughing matter.



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