Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Dry Mouth

What is dry mouth?

Dry mouth, also called **xerostomia** (ZEER-oh-STOH-mee-uh), is the feeling that you don't have enough saliva. Dry mouth can happen with or without a loss of saliva.

Saliva helps to fight infection and maintain the health of your teeth, gums, and mouth. A loss of saliva is uncomfortable and may lead to tooth decay, tooth loss, and/or mouth infection.

Common causes

- Cancer treatments:
  - Chemotherapy
  - Radiation to the head and neck.
  - Immunotherapy
  - Chronic graft-versus-host disease (GVHD) after a bone marrow or stem cell transplant.
- Medicines such as:
  - Diuretics ("water pills")
  - Antihistamines ("allergy pills")
- Dehydration

Common symptoms

Tell your cancer care team if you have any of these symptoms:

- Feeling that the mouth is dry all the time/ like you don't have enough saliva.
- Needing to drink water often.
- Feeling like there is a film on your teeth.
- Bitter or metal-like taste.
- Pain, burning, or sensitivity in the mouth.
- Tongue appears dry, red, or white; or feels swollen.
- Trouble talking.
- Trouble chewing food, swallowing, or food getting stuck in your throat.
- Thick and sticky saliva.

How to diagnose

Your cancer care team will look inside your mouth. They will also ask you about your health history and cancer treatment.

How to treat

Your doctor may prescribe a medicine to increase saliva, such as pilocarpine (Salagen®) or cevimeline (Evoxac®).

- Follow the dosage instructions from your doctor.
- Relief may take several weeks, so it is important to take these medicines as directed.
- Common side effects include sweating, nausea, or a runny nose.

How to manage

- Stay hydrated. Try to drink at least 6 to 8 glasses of fluids each day, unless you are on

water restriction.
- Cut food into small pieces. Chew food slowly and completely before swallowing.
- Avoid drinking alcohol and caffeinated drinks.
- Do not use mouthwashes that contain alcohol.
- Avoid antihistamines (allergy medicines) and decongestants (cold medicines).
- Use a humidifier at night.
- Follow good oral hygiene: brush and floss after every meal, or as recommended.
    - Ask your cancer care team/dentist if a special fluoride rinse or gel may be helpful to prevent cavities.
- Keep all routine dental appointments (every 6 months, or as recommended).

Over-the-counter products that may help

- Sugar-free or xylitol-containing gum and hard candy to help increase saliva.
- Artificial saliva to help make chewing, swallowing, and speaking more comfortable.
- Rinses, sprays, and gels to help relieve some dry mouth symptoms.
    - These products are available at Dana-Farber's pharmacy, your local pharmacy, grocery store, or online.

If you can't find these products, talk with your pharmacist. Some items may be ordered for you.

What to expect

- Dry mouth caused by chemo usually improves after treatment ends.
- Dry mouth from radiation (head/neck), chronic GVHD, or immunotherapy may last for a longer time. **Tell your cancer care team if your dry mouth continues.**

Learn more online about oral care during cancer treatment:
www.dana-farber.org/oral-medicine-and-oral-oncology/patient-resources

The instructions in this teaching sheet are for informational purposes only. The content is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your doctor or other qualified health provider with any questions regarding your medical condition. If you experience any significant change in your health during or after treatment, contact a member of your cancer care team right away.

