Is dry mouth a problem?

By Heather Lewis*

Xerostomia is the medical term used to describe a dry mouth. It has been suggested that as many as 1 in 10 adults, mainly middle aged and later, will suffer from this complaint at some time: 21% of men and 27% of women. In older individuals this may be as high as 40%.

Xerostomia is often a contributing factor for both minor and serious health problems, affecting nutritional status and dental health, as well as having a detrimental impact on a sufferer's psychological well being. Problems associated with xerostomia include a burning sensation and difficulty speaking and swallowing. It also has a role to play in caries (tooth decay) and periodontal (gum) disease.

What causes dry mouth?

There are 5 main causes:

1. Unwanted side effects of medication. A wide range of drugs are associated with causing a dry mouth, however the ones most frequently implicated are antidepressants, antihistamines, diuretics and narcotics.
2. Undiagnosed diabetes.
3. Connective tissue disease in particular rheumatoid arthritis. Sjögren's syndrome is a particular condition involving dry mouth, dry eyes and connective tissue disease.
4. Complication of radiotherapy treatment to the head and neck
5. Chronic anxiety

Treatment

Unfortunately the management of dry mouth can be extremely difficult. The best approach to this problem is by trying to provide moisture and lubrication to the mouth.

People with a dry mouth often have an increased need to drink water, especially at night and dentures, if worn, are poorly retained. In fact some people find it embarrassing to eat in company as they take longer, need to drink frequently and may have to spit out food that they simply cannot swallow. Some sufferers are so badly affected that they fear that they may choke whilst eating or taking their regular medication.

Here are some ideas that may help:

• Have a glass of water with meals;
• Avoid dry, spicy, acidic or salty foods if uncomfortable;
• Make a gravy or sauce to moisten meals;
• Use a saliva replacement gel prior to taking medications to aid swallowing;
• Use ice cubes instead of sipping water;
• Suck sugar free sweets or gum;
• Use saliva replacement gel/spray at night;
• Avoid smoking;
• Limit your alcohol intake.

Conclusion

Your Dentist or Dental Hygienist can play a significant role in minimising the impact of this condition on your dental and general health. Why not make them your first port of call!

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