

## **DRY MOUTH EXPLAINED**

### **What is dry mouth?**

Everyone has a dry mouth from time to time, but if you have a dry mouth all or most of the time a number of health problems can arise.

The medical name for dry mouth is xerostomia (pronounced “zero-stoh-mee-a”)

### **What causes dry mouth?**

Dry mouth happens when your salivary glands (in the mouth) don’t produce enough saliva.

A dry mouth can be temporary or long-term. Temporary dry mouth may be caused by stress or by a wide range of medicines, both those prescribed by your doctor and some you can buy over-the-counter- in the pharmacy.

### **Some causes of temporary dry mouth:**

- anxiety
- stress
- some medicines
- smoking
- mouth breathing

Long-term dry mouth may be irreversible and can be caused by medical treatments such as radiotherapy or head and neck surgery. A number of illnesses and disorders can also cause dry mouth (see table below).

### **Some causes of long-term dry mouth:**

- radiotherapy
- head and neck surgery
- diabetes
- Sjögrens syndrome
- SLE (lupus)
- Rheumatoid arthritis

### **How will dry mouth affect me?**

If you have been experiencing a feeling of dryness regularly, you will already know how difficult it is to carry out normal day-to-day functions, such as eating, swallowing, speaking and even enjoying a restful night’s sleep.

You may be feeling thirsty, have lost most of your sense of taste, and be suffering a burning sensation in your mouth and cracked lips.

Your dental health may be starting to suffer, your dentist may have told you that your teeth and gums are not as healthy as before. You may be aware that your breath is not very fresh.

### **Why is saliva so important?**

Saliva is quite a complex fluid and has a number of important roles. Although mainly consisting of water, it also contains a lot of other ingredients responsible for lubrication, digestion, and killing bacteria, fungi and viruses.

### **Saliva – it's importance:**

- helps chewing and swallowing
- starts digestion of food
- helps speech
- protects against bacteria, fungi and viruses
- contains minerals which repair teeth

### **What can be done to ease the effects of dry mouth?**

If the cause of the dry mouth can be identified your healthcare professional may be able to rectify the problem (e.g. if it is being caused by a medicine you are taking).

To stimulate your own saliva you may be advised to suck sugar-free sweets or chew gum. Your mouth will benefit from the natural protective mechanisms of your own saliva.

Short term relief can be obtained by sipping water or sucking an ice cube. The use of an artificial saliva spray may provide slightly longer lasting relief.

However, none of these will provide a feeling of sustained moisture, nor will they act in the same way as your natural saliva in maintaining the health of your teeth and gums.

### **Remedies for dry mouth:**

- moisturising gels
- saliva substitutes
- sipping water
- suck ice cubes
- sugar-free sweets and gums.