

# Dry Mouth and Saliva Education

## Saliva and oral health:

Saliva may seem just like water, but that is far from true. Saliva contains hundreds of the body's "natural medicines" and parts of your immune system designed to keep your mouth healthy. Saliva contains chemicals that make speaking, chewing, and swallowing more comfortable. It also regulates the microorganisms ("germs") that cause oral infections. Most people have a dry mouth (called xerostomia) as a side-effect of medications. Also chemotherapy, radiation therapy, and some diseases can cause your glands to produce less saliva. It is important that your dentist find out the cause of your dry mouth so you can be treated properly. Many people do not know they have xerostomia because one must lose about half of their saliva before it is noticeable.

## Oral lubricants:

There are products designed to replace lost saliva. They are sometimes called saliva substitutes or "artificial saliva" but should be thought of as oral lubricants. Unfortunately, science has yet to produce anything that can replace all the functions of saliva. However, many people find that oral lubricants make their mouths feel more comfortable. Several oral lubricants come in a small spray bottle that can conveniently be carried in a purse or pocket. Some people prefer to just use water. Your dentist can suggest which product may be most helpful for your particular situation.

## Eating with a dry mouth:

There are many problems you may have with your dentures if you do not have enough saliva. Because of inadequate lubrication, chewing and swallowing foods, especially dry foods, may be a problem. Using gravies and sauces with dry foods in addition to frequent sips of water while eating can help. Using an oral lubricate a few minutes before eating can also help. Be sure to remove your dentures before using the lubricant so it can coat the parts of the gums that support the dentures, and then place the dentures back in the mouth.

## Dry mouth and denture "fit":

Saliva helps your denture hold onto the gums, what dentists call retention. When your mouth is dry the denture tends to feel loose. This is made worse because the supporting tissues under your dentures continue to shrink throughout the rest of your life. The amount of shrinkage varies from person to person. As the gums shrink, the denture and the gums become mismatched. This happens little by little, but even a small change in the "fit" of the denture is more noticeable when the mouth is dry. Most people notice this more often with the lower denture. The size and shape of the upper gums usually make wearing an upper

denture easier. As shrinkage occurs, you may need to have your denture remade or relined more frequently than someone who has enough saliva. A reline is a procedure in which additional denture material is added to the part of the denture that contacts the gums so that the denture once again closely conforms to the shape of the mouth. Even with a "perfect fit," you may still experience some looseness due to the lack of saliva to help hold the denture in place. A denture adhesive may be of help in this case. There are many types of adhesives available, and your dentist can offer advice on which one best fits your needs. In addition to a feeling of increased looseness, you may have more sore spots under your denture due to reduced saliva. Without the saliva to provide lubrication between your denture and gums, the increased friction from the dry denture rubs a sore. Your dentist should first check to be sure the denture "fit" is as perfect as possible. If nothing needs to be done to the denture, an oral lubricant or denture adhesive may help. If you continue to have problems ask your dentist if dental implants might be right for you. Replacing dentures with teeth supported by implants has been a life changing experience for thousands of people. This miracle of modern dentistry is as close as possible to having your own natural teeth again and will eliminate most or all of the problems listed above.

### **Dry mouth and oral infections:**

Since saliva regulates the germs in the mouth, a person with dry mouth is more prone to oral infections. In denture wearers Candida, a yeast-like fungus, is a frequent cause of infections. One such infection is denture stomatitis. It is more common under the upper denture, especially in those with dry mouth who wear their denture during sleep. Most cases do not cause enough pain to be noticed so they may exist for years. It is very important to eliminate denture stomatitis if new dentures are to be made. This may require treatment with both tissue conditioners and antifungal medications. Another condition usually caused by Candida is angular cheilitis, recurrent sores that occur at the corners of the mouth. Antifungal medications are also of help with this condition. Antifungals are often used incorrectly so be sure you understand how and when to use them.

If you have some natural teeth, tooth decay is the most frequent cause of tooth loss in older adults who have a dry mouth. Without saliva to regulate the germs that cause decay, they are able to grow in number and cause more damage. Ask your dentist or dental hygienist for ways to reduce tooth decay.