Nutrition Strategies for Managing Dry Mouth

Is dry mouth impacting your nutrition or quality of life? Here's what you can do.

January 28, 2019 By Danielle Penick

Cancer therapies can take a toll on the mouth, even if the cancer has nothing to do with the head or neck. Some chemotherapies, radiation (to specific areas), or some medications can lead to a dry or sore mouth (also known as xerostomia), which may make it difficult to swallow, eat, or may even alter the taste of food. It can also increase the risk for cavities or lead to a mouth infection. Decreased saliva production can cause thick, sticky, or ropy saliva and can make it difficult to talk or wear your dentures even. Along with all of the other side effects mentioned, dry mouth can significantly impact quality of life, daily activities, and your nutrition. But thankfully this is usually a temporary side effect and often clears up within 2-8 weeks after chemotherapy ends or up to 6 months after radiation therapy ends. For some people however, it may not clear up for about a year after radiation therapy, and others may experience some level of dry mouth long term—this is especially true if the radiation was targeted to the salivary glands.

Who's at risk?

If you have radiation therapy to your head or neck, this can damage the salivary glands and can cause decreased production of saliva. Some medications or chemos also can cause dry mouth, so it's important to ask your oncologist what risk you have. Dry mouth can also be a result of graft vs host disease from bone marrow transplant, dehydration, or a mouth infection.

Tips to alleviate dry mouth

So what can you do? I recommend following the tips below to help keep your nutrition up and to improve your quality of life.

Stay hydrated and drink water all throughout the day. It's best to sip on it regularly if you can.

Try sour or tart foods such as lemon drops, to help with producing saliva. Caution: don't try this if you have mouth sores however.

Chew on gum.

Try sucking on ice cubes, frozen grapes, or have a popsicle.

Add gravies or sauces to your foods.

Try soups or other pureed foods like hummus.

Avoid alcohol.

Smoothies may help coat the mouth and help you get adequate nutrition.

Try soft foods like pudding, yogurt, custards, scrambled eggs, oatmeal, or cream of wheat.

Drink with a straw.

Rinse your mouth out before and after meals. Use alcohol free mouth rinses like Biotene.

Avoid salty or spicy foods.

Avoid crunch foods such as chips or granola.

Don’t smoke.

If your dry mouth is severe, talk to a doctor about medications that may help to stimulate saliva production. For example, Xylimelts may be a good option.

Take small bites and chew your food well.

Try only cold or lukewarm foods.

Nutrition supplement drinks like Boost, Ensure, Orgain, Muscle Milk, etc may help you meet your nutrition needs if you are not able to eat well.

Avoid foods that stick to the roof of your mouth like peanut butter or soft bread.

Limit caffeine intake.

Try fresh pineapple or papaya (but don’t try this if you have mouth sores). Pineapple contains bromelain and papaya contains papain, which are enzymes that can help to thin saliva.

Avoid sticky and sugary food and drinks.

Try artificial saliva spray.

There are other strategies that you may find work best for you. Food journaling may help to give you some ideas to continue or insight for what to avoid. Create a list and see what plan you come up with!

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