



[cancer.org](https://www.cancer.org) | 1.800.227.2345

Mouth Dryness or Thick Saliva

Dry mouth, or **xerostomia**, develops when your body doesn't make enough saliva (spit) or when saliva becomes very thick.

- [What causes dry mouth or thick saliva?](#)
- [Symptoms of dry mouth](#)
- [Treatment for dry mouth or thick saliva](#)
- [Tips for managing dry mouth](#)
- [Call your doctor or cancer care team if you](#)

What causes dry mouth or thick saliva?

The most common cause of dry mouth is radiation therapy to the head and neck area. Some types of chemotherapy, certain other medicines, and dehydration can also cause dry mouth. The salivary glands can become damaged and make less saliva, or your saliva can become very thick and sticky.

Having a dry mouth or thick saliva can increase your risk of cavities and mouth infections. Smoking, chewing tobacco, and drinking alcohol can make dryness worse.

Dry mouth may last for a little while, such as during [chemotherapy](#)¹. But sometimes, dry mouth might be permanent. This happens most often with high doses of [radiation](#)² to the head and neck area.

Dry mouth can also be caused by:

- Graft-versus-host disease, which sometimes happens with a bone marrow or [stem cell transplant](#)³
- Antidepressants

- Medicines called diuretics, which make your body get rid of fluids
- Some pain medicines
- Medicines for nausea and vomiting (antiemetics)
- Mouth infections
- Antihistamines

Symptoms of dry mouth

- A sticky, dry feeling in the mouth
- Thick, stringy saliva that sticks to lips when you open your mouth
- Pain or burning in the mouth or on the tongue
- Cracks in the lips or at the corner of your mouth
- Ridges or cracks on your tongue
- Trouble chewing, tasting, or swallowing
- Trouble talking

Having a dry mouth makes you more likely to get an infection, gum disease, and tooth decay (cavities).

Treatment for dry mouth or thick saliva

Many treatments for dry mouth are suggested for people getting radiation for head and neck cancer. They may or may not help with dry mouth from other types of treatments or in other types of cancer. Some of these treatments include:

- Medicines such as pilocarpine, cevimeline, or bethanechol
- Acupuncture to improve the symptoms of dry mouth
- Transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation (TENS) to help the glands make more saliva

There are also ways to give radiation treatment that might protect the salivary glands. Ask your radiation oncology doctor if these might be options for you.

Tips for managing dry mouth

Keep your mouth clean

- Brush your teeth each time you eat and at bedtime. Use a soft toothbrush.

- Have dry, cracked lips or [mouth sores](#)⁵
- Have new mouth dryness for more than 3 days

Hyperlinks

1. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/chemotherapy.html
2. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/radiation.html
3. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/treatment-types/stem-cell-transplant.html
4. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/eating-problems/swallowing-problems.html
5. www.cancer.org/cancer/managing-cancer/side-effects/eating-problems/mouth-sores.html

References

Alhejoury HA, Mogharbel LF, Al-Qadhi MA, et al. Artificial Saliva for Therapeutic Management of Xerostomia: A Narrative Review. *J Pharm Bioallied Sci.* 2021;13(Suppl 2):S903-S907.

American Society of Clinical Oncology. Dry Mouth or Xerostomia. Accessed at cancer.net. Content is no longer available.

Freedman K & Hole A. Gastrointestinal complications. In: Eggert JA, Byar KL & Parks LS, ed. *Cancer Basics.* Oncology Nursing Society; 2022: 313-331.

Mercadante V, Jensen SB, Smith DK, et al. Salivary Gland Hypofunction and/or Xerostomia Induced by Nonsurgical Cancer Therapies: ISOO/MASCC/ASCO Guideline. *J Clin Oncol.* 2021;39(25):2825-2843.

Ni X, Tian T, Chen D, et al. Acupuncture for Radiation-Induced Xerostomia in Cancer Patients: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Integr Cancer Ther.* 2020;19:1534735420980825.

Roesser KA. Stomatitis/Xerostomia. In: Camp-Sorrel D, Hawkins RA, Cope DG, eds. *Clinical Manual for the Advanced Practice Nurse.* Oncology Nursing Society; 2022: 77-83.

Last Revised: June 26, 2024

Written by
