Article Series Nutrition

Foods to eat (and avoid) when you have dry mouth

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Dry mouth, or xerostomia, is a common complaint for people living with cancer. What causes dry mouth in people with cancer?

Often, it can be a side effect of radiation therapy to the head and neck area. Some other cancer treatments and medicines may also cause it. These treatments may result in the salivary glands becoming damaged and either not making enough saliva or the saliva being overly thick and sticky. Occasionally, it can be a symptom

of the cancer itself.

And while it might not sound like a big problem, dry mouth can be a source of real discomfort, leaving you parched and making it more difficult to eat, sleep, and go about your daily life. It may also increase the risk of other health problems like mouth infections, tooth decay and cavities.

Dry mouth can be unpleasant — and potentially serious — so it’s important to address it thoughtfully. There are steps you can take to improve both your comfort and your health, and choosing certain foods is a good place to start.

Knowing what to eat — and what to avoid — can make a difference. In general, you may find that soft, moist, foods are best.

Here are some **Microsteps** to consider when it comes to choosing and avoiding certain foods if you’re experiencing dry mouth. As always, consult with your care team for the guidance and recommendations that are best for you.

Adding a moisture-rich sauce or broth to your meal.

Try adding moisture to your dish with a low-sodium sauce, broth, milk, or gravy. For example, if you’re having rice, you can stir in a few spoonfuls of warm low-sodium broth, drizzle with olive oil, or top with a flavorful tomato sauce. This may make it easier to chew and swallow.

Swapping dry, starchy foods for soft, moist alternatives.

Foods like toast, crackers, dry cereal, pretzels and chips may make dry mouth worse. Instead, consider crustless, soft whole-grain bread topped with olive oil or hummus; swap dry cereal for oatmeal or cooked quinoa with warm milk and sliced ripe banana; and replace chips with soft roasted sweet potato wedges.

Carrying lozenges or sugar-free chewing gum with you to keep your mouth moist.

When you chew and swallow, it can help your body make more saliva. If you’re not producing enough saliva, sugar-free gum, mints or lozenges may help. You can also ask your care team for their recommendations.

Picking one night a week to make a batch of soup or stew.

Having smooth, liquid-based meals throughout the week can reduce the stress of cooking and set you up with filling meals that may help with dry mouth.

Taking a sip between bites.

If your meal includes harder, drier foods, like tough meats or raw vegetables, you could try making a habit of sipping your drink or having a spoonful of soup between mouthfuls.

Choosing less acidic drinks to sip on throughout your day.

Acidic juices like tomato, orange, apple, and grapefruit may contribute to dry mouth. Instead, consider water, vegetable juice, coconut water, or papaya juice.

Hydrating with delicious ice pops.

You can make your own ice pops using fruit juices like papaya juice, coconut water, or ginger tea. Pour the liquid into an ice pop mold or ice cube tray, insert popsicle sticks once partially frozen (or if using a mold with slots for sticks, insert immediately), then freeze completely and enjoy throughout the day. These cooling pops can provide lasting moisture and a refreshing way to keep your mouth feeling comfortable.

Enjoying a non-alcoholic mocktail with dinner.

Drinking alcohol can make mouth dryness worse. Instead, try adding a slice of cucumber and fresh mint leaves to water, or combine pear juice and water, a splash of coconut water, and a few crushed mint leaves served over ice for hydration and a hint of sweetness.

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