

## DRY MOUTH IN THE ELDERLY CAN BE OVERLOOKED BY CAREGIVERS



Most people call it dry mouth. It's that parched, gritty, sticky feeling that comes when a person is not producing enough saliva. And it can have a big impact on your loved one's health.

Dry mouth is the rule rather than the exception among the elderly and that the consequences can be catastrophic. Patients who haven't had a cavity in decades can suddenly find that their mouths are riddled with decay, especially around the roots where it is difficult to treat, or may find that their mouths burn or are overly sensitive to hot and cold. Appetite may wane as foods become tasteless and hard to eat.

Dry mouth is not a normal consequence of aging, although the affliction is particularly common among the elderly, partly because nine out of 10 people over the age of 65 take medications. More than 500 drugs can cause dry mouth, including those used to treat heart problems, allergies, cancer and anxiety, according to the American Dental Association.

Although medication is the main reason patients develop dry mouth, it can have other causes as well. Among them are infections, alcohol abuse, trauma to the mouth and hormone changes (such as happen with menopause).

Chronic allergies, adenoids, blocked nasal passages and even bad posture can cause mouth breathing, which also dries out tissues. Mouth breathers also often snore or have sleep apnea, which raises the risk of stroke and cardiovascular disease.

For all of the problems it causes, dry mouth can be overlooked by caregivers and even the sufferers themselves because its onset is often slow. Dentists often bring it to the attention of patients more often than not. Dentists can detect it because the tongue tends to have a white coating and the insides of cheeks are red—and tooth damage can be extensive.