

# Xerostomia in Vulnerable Elders

## Prevalence, Risk Factors, and Management

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### Background

- Xerostomia (dry mouth)
  - A condition in which the mouth is unable to stay moist due to poor functioning of salivary glands
  - Can cause chewing, eating, swallowing and talking difficulties
  - Not a disease but can be a symptom of certain diseases
- Dry mouth in older adults
  - Chronic medical conditions
  - Multiple medication use
  - Salivary gland dysfunction
- Saliva
  - Complex mixture of water, proteins and acid reducing agents
  - Neutralizes acids produced by oral bacteria
  - Maintains health of teeth and gums
  - Supports immune health
  - Helps with lubrication and swallowing

### Prevalence

- \*Prevalence increases with age
- \*Prevalence over age 65 is 17-63%
- \*More common in females than males

### Risk Factors

- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Sjogren's syndrome
- Diabetes mellitus
- Hypothyroidism
- Depression
- HIV/AIDS
- Uncontrolled high blood pressure
- Anemia
- Damage to salivary glands:
  - Radiation therapy to the head and neck
  - Chemotherapy
  - Injury/surgery
- Hormonal changes:
  - Menopause
  - Addison's disease
- Alzheimer's disease
- Alcoholic cirrhosis
- Local factors (infections of salivary glands, obstructions)
- Eating disorders and dehydration
- Mouth breathing

### Signs & Symptoms

- Dry/ sticky mouth feeling
- Difficulty chewing, swallowing or speaking
- Dry, cracked lips
- Mouth sores
- Increased thirst
- Difficulty in wearing removable dentures
- Increase in fungal and salivary gland infections
- Rapidly increased tooth decay/plaque buildup
- Sticky/stringy saliva
- Halitosis
- Cheilitis – inflammation and fissuring of the lips
- Burning mouth
- Dysgeusia – taste disorders
- Glossodynia – painful tongue
- Lipstick sticking to teeth



### Comfort/ Care Tips

#### Do

Adjust medications or dosages

Meticulous oral hygiene  
• Frequent dental examinations  
• Fluoride therapy

Stimulation of salivary glands  
• Salivary substitutes  
• Sugarless gums & candy  
• Non-alcohol antimicrobial mouth rinses

Hydrate during the day and use humidifier at night

#### Avoid

Alcohol

Tobacco

Caffeine

### Palliative Treatment

- Use alternate, nonxerostomic medications
- Pilocarpine (Salagen) 5 mg, qid, prescription required
- Cevimeline (Evoxac) 30 mg, tid, prescription required
- Special food preparation – blended/moist foods are easier to swallow
- Artificial saliva (available over-the-counter)
- Acupuncture