

THERE IS NO HEALTH WITHOUT GOOD ORAL HEALTH*

By Carol Van Aernam, RDH, BA

Question: Why is a dry mouth important?

Answer: Without enough saliva in your mouth you have difficulty speaking or trouble tasting, chewing and swallowing. You have an increased risk of getting tooth decay, gum disease, mouth sores, thrush, and difficulty in wearing dentures.

Question: What causes a dry mouth?

Answer: The side effects of over 400 medications, both prescription and over the counter drugs. Side effects of certain diseases and infections including Alzheimer's disease, diabetes, anemia, rheumatoid arthritis, hypertension, Parkinson's disease, cancer and stroke.

Question: What are the symptoms of a dry mouth?

Answer: If they are not producing enough saliva you may notice your person served experiences a dry or sticky feeling in the mouth, frequent thirst, a burning or tingling sensation in the mouth and especially on the tongue. They may also have hoarseness, dry nasal passages or sore throat, bad breath and problems wearing their dentures.

Question: What can be done about a dry mouth?

Answer: Treatment will depend on what is causing the problem. If it is caused by medication, check with your supervisor who can refer to their physician to see if the physician can adjust their medication. An artificial saliva product may help keep the mouth moist. There are several mouth rinses, sprays, and mints that are available over the counter.

Question: What can you do to help the person served?

Answer: Offer water or sugarless drinks often and at meal time. Suggest they avoid drinks with caffeine, such as coffee, tea, and some sodas. Check to see if chewing gum or sucking on sugarless hard candy to stimulate saliva flow is good for the individual. Some might contain xylitol and may help prevent cavities. Discuss avoiding the use of tobacco or alcohol. Be aware that spicy or salty foods can cause pain in a dry mouth. Use a humidifier at night.

Question: What should I do if the problem continues?

Answer: Refer to your direct supervisor or family caregiver depending upon the setting in which you work. If you are a family caregiver, please consult with your dental or medical provider.

DAILY ORAL CARE = INFECTION CONTROL.

**Surgeon General, Report on Oral Health, 2000*

All health and long term service and support (LTSS) professionals/caregivers are expected to work within their Scopes of Practice or job descriptions as defined by the State or employer. Family caregivers are encouraged to contact the dental or medical provider before making changes to a loved one's care plan.



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Meet Carol, a Registered Dental Hygienist and a Mouth Care Matters consultant and instructor.

Carol Van Aernam is a Mouth Care Matters (MCM) instructor and consultant for Iowa CareGivers. She plays a key role in planning, promoting, and teaching MCM. Carol worked in private dental practice for several years and 34 years for the Veterans Administration and Central Iowa Health Care System as a dental hygienist. She specializes in geriatric care and has presented programs at the local and national levels to those who work in direct care, dietitians, dentists, dental hygienists, and other caregivers. In addition, Carol served as an adjunct instructor for Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC) and the University of Iowa.



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