

Dry mouth can reveal lingering health issues

May 6 2015, by Tarwinder Rai



Deborah Berry (right) with oral pathologist Seema Ganatra

Deborah Berry had visited numerous health-care professionals, but no one was able to accurately diagnose and treat the many lumps and cuts on the inside of her mouth. Berry, who suffers from systemic lupus erythematosus, eventually just accepted it as a possible side-effect of her health condition.

But a visit to the oral pathology clinic in the University of Alberta's

School of Dentistry—the only one in Alberta—quickly changed all that.

She had come to the general practice clinic for a teeth cleaning. But after a quick oral exam by her dental hygienist, Berry found her way to oral pathologists Ed Peters and clinical professor Seema Ganatra, and found the answers she'd been looking for.

Berry was diagnosed with xerostomia, more commonly known as [dry mouth](#). If left untreated, it can often lead to or be a sign of other lingering health problems. Dry mouth most often results from a decrease in [saliva](#) produced by the salivary glands in your mouth.

"I never really knew what to do about the mouth sores," says Berry, who had spent more than 10 years looking for answers to her dental concerns. "My problem just seemed to be getting worse. It would be painful at times. When you don't make enough saliva, even eating is a problem."

Dry mouth is common: 20 per cent of the general population and 50 per cent of seniors are said to be suffering from it. It is often caused by prescription medications, untreated diabetes, radiation therapy and autoimmune diseases.

Since beginning her treatment, Berry has been strictly following the treatment plan and using the medications and products prescribed by Ganatra.

"Saliva helps prevent tooth decay and keeps your teeth healthy. It neutralizes the acids and bacteria in your mouth and washes away food," says Ganatra. "If you don't produce enough saliva, you can become more prone to cavities."

Preventing cavities is the key for patients with dry mouth. High-fluoride toothpastes, home fluoride treatments and fluoride varnishes on teeth

will assist in alleviating dry mouth. Saliva substitutes are also helpful for some patients.

"The consequences of dry mouth can be reduced by making dietary changes," says Ganatra. She recommends avoiding high-sugar drinks like pop, juice and even coffee. Drinking more water and chewing sugar-free gum with Xylitol can help keep the mouth moist. "People realize they have dry mouth, but generally start to complain when it gets progressively worse. Chewing gum after a meal for at least 15 minutes helps to get the saliva flowing and cleans your teeth at the same time."

Berry says since she's become a patient of the clinic, her life has dramatically changed and she no longer has as many sores.

Provided by University of Alberta

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