

## How Medication Can Affect Your Oral Health

“Many medications ... have oral side effects...”



A number of medications (prescription drugs, over the counter drugs, vitamins and minerals) can affect oral health.<sup>1</sup> Many medications for chronic diseases have oral side effects that people might not be aware of. A thorough medical history review is important when visiting a dental office to alert the dental staff of any medication-related side effects that may be occurring. Many of the common adverse effects of medication use that are seen in the oral cavity are dry mouth, abnormal bleeding of the gums, gingival enlargement, and soft tissue reactions. However, these side effects can be minimized by good oral hygiene practices, including regular brushing with a fluoridated toothpaste and flossing.

## Oral Conditions That Are Often Caused By Medications

### Dry Mouth

Dry mouth is also known as xerostomia (pronounced as zero-stoh'-me-ah) which is a lack of saliva in the mouth. Reduction in the flow of saliva increases the risk for cavities,<sup>2</sup> since saliva contains anti-microbial properties that help the teeth stay strong and cavity-free. For those who are experiencing dry mouth, drinking lots of water or sugar-free drinks throughout the day will help keep the mouth moist.

### What You Can Do about Dry Mouth

- Sip water or **sugar-free** drinks often
- Use **sugar-free** gum or hard candy to stimulate saliva flow
- Avoid drinks with caffeine like coffee, tea, and sodas & do not use tobacco or alcohol. They dry out the mouth

### Abnormal Bleeding

Reduced blood clotting is a side effect of many anticoagulant medications including aspirin.<sup>3</sup> Some of the most common anticoagulant medications are *warfarin* and *heparin* which are both used to prevent blood clotting in individuals with a risk of heart attack or stroke. Your dental provider should always know what medications you are taking, especially when your treatment might involve some bleeding.<sup>3</sup> Your dental provider may consult with your physician before any treatment is provided.



### Enlargement of the Gums

Overgrown or enlarged gums are sometimes known as “gingival overgrowth” or “gingival hyperplasia”.<sup>3</sup> The enlargement is caused mostly by medications but the reason for occurrence while on these medications is still unknown. The most common medications that produce this side effect are *phenytoin*, *nifedipine*, *verapamil*, *cyclosporine*, and *diltiazem*. Many patients treated with these drugs experience some form of unwanted gingival (gum) growth and may have to be treated surgically to remove the excess tissue.<sup>4</sup> However if a patient being treated with one of these drugs practices a meticulous oral hygiene care, the occurrence can be minimized.



## Soft Tissue Reaction- Oral Thrush

Oral thrush is a fungal infection and also known as “oral candidiasis”. It is caused by a form of yeast called “Candida Albicans” and is prevalent in patients whose immune systems are compromised.<sup>5</sup> It is also common in patients who use inhalers or wear dentures.<sup>5</sup> A healthy immune system keeps bacteria controlled in the mouth, but when a patient is using antibiotics or use inhalers that have steroids, their immune systems become weaker to fight off infections, thus increase their chance of developing thrush. High glucose level is also known to increase the risk,<sup>6</sup> therefore diabetes patients should be advised. Oral thrush causes white patches that can be painful. To prevent oral thrush, patients who use inhalers should brush their teeth and clean the mouth piece of the inhaler after each use. Denture wearers should brush their dentures thoroughly and take them off at night for the tissues to rest and to prevent the fungal infection from harboring.



## How do I maintain my oral health when taking medications?

- Brush and floss regularly and use fluoridated toothpaste
- When being prescribed a new medication, ask your doctor or pharmacist about all the possible side effects
- Bring an updated list of your medications to all your appointments to alert dental providers
- Visit a dental provider on a regular basis, even if you have no natural teeth
- Drink water and limit your consumption of sugary foods and drinks

## References

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Ciancio, Sebastian G. "Medication's impact on oral health." J Am Dent Assoc 135.10 (2004): 1440-1448.
  - <sup>2</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Oral Health for Older Americans - Fact Sheets and FAQs - Publications - Oral Health." Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 June 2010. <[http://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/publications/factsheets/adult\\_older.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/oralhealth/publications/factsheets/adult_older.htm)>.
  - <sup>3</sup> American Dental Association. "How medications can affect your oral health." J Am Dent Assoc 136.6 (2005): 831.
  - <sup>4</sup> Seymour, R.A., J.S. Ellis, and J.M. Thomason. "Risk factors for drug-induced gingival overgrowth." Journal of Clinical Periodontology 27.4 (2001): 217 - 223.
  - <sup>5</sup> Oral thrush: Symptoms - MayoClinic.com." Mayo Clinic medical information and tools for healthy living - MayoClinic.com. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 June 2010. <<http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/oral-thrush/DS00408/DSECTION=symptoms>>.
  - <sup>6</sup> American Dental Association. "Diabetes Tips for Good Oral Health." Journal of American Dental Association 141 (2010): 926. Print.

*For more information, contact:*  
**Massachusetts Department of Public Health**  
**Office of Oral Health**  
**250 Washington Street**  
**Boston, MA 02108-4619**  
**[Oral.Health@state.ma.us](mailto:Oral.Health@state.ma.us)**

