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Sjögren's Disease: Resources and Protecting Your Teeth

For patients living with Sjögren's, or wondering whether they might be.

What it is. Sjögren's is an autoimmune disease: the immune system attacks the glands that make moisture, most noticeably saliva and tears. It can affect the whole body, not just the mouth and eyes, which is why the Sjögren's Foundation now calls it Sjögren's *disease* rather than syndrome. Most people diagnosed are women, usually in their 40s or 50s.

Beyond a dry mouth and dry eyes

- Fatigue that doesn't go away
- Joint and muscle pain
- Dry skin, dry cough, vaginal dryness
- Swelling of the glands around the face and neck
- Numbness or tingling

Getting a diagnosis

- **A rheumatologist** (a specialist in autoimmune disease) is usually the doctor who diagnoses it. There is no single test.
- Common tests: blood work for SS-A (Ro) and SS-B (La) antibodies, a tear test, a saliva flow test, and sometimes a small biopsy of the glands inside the lip.
- Diagnosis often takes years, so bring a written list of every dry or unusual symptom, even ones that seem unrelated.

Protecting your teeth

- **Decay moves fast without saliva,** often at the gumline. Cleanings every three or four months instead of six catch it early.
- **Remineralize every night:** prescription-strength fluoride or a nano-hydroxyapatite paste, last thing. Spit, don't rinse. Fluoride varnish at visits helps too.
- **Xylitol gum or lozenges** after meals. Chewing raises saliva in glands that still work.
- **Sip plain water,** never anything sweet or acidic.
- **A saliva substitute gel** at night, and a humidifier in the bedroom.
- **Skip** alcohol-based mouthwash and SLS toothpaste.
- **Dentures** can be harder to keep in with a dry mouth. Tell us if yours are.

Prescription options

Pilocarpine (Salagen) and cevimeline (Evoxac) stimulate the glands to make more saliva, and can help tears too. They work only when the glands still have some function, can take weeks to help, and aren't right for everyone. Ask your rheumatologist.

Oral probiotics

They may help the balance of bacteria and yeast in your mouth, but they won't make more saliva. In one small study of Sjögren's patients, probiotics lowered oral yeast (thrush). Worth a try if you have burning, a coated tongue or sore corners of the mouth, and let us take a look too.

Tell your doctor promptly if one salivary gland stays swollen (often near the jaw, in front of the ear), or lymph nodes stay swollen for more than a few weeks. Sjögren's carries a higher chance of lymphoma. Most people with Sjögren's never develop it, but persistent swelling should be checked.

Where to find help

Sjögren's Foundation	Patient education, research, support groups. sjogrens.org · 301-530-4420
Support groups	No Nevada group meets right now (the Great Basin group is looking for a leader). Virtual groups: sjogrens.org/support-groups
Find a rheumatologist	American College of Rheumatology directory: my.rheumatology.org/find_rheumatology_professional
National Institutes of Health	Dental: nidcr.nih.gov/health-info/sjogrens-disease Overview: niams.nih.gov/health-topics/sjogrens-disease
Dry eyes	National Eye Institute: nei.nih.gov (search "dry eye")

Questions? Call 702-734-0776

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Sources: Sjögren's Foundation; NIH (NIDCR, NIAMS); American College of Rheumatology; Kamal Y, et al. 2020 (probiotics, 32 patients, 5 weeks).
We have no relationship with any organization listed. General information, not a substitute for an exam or for your physician's advice.

Our dry mouth article