

- Introduction
- Possible problems
- What can be done?
- Too much saliva
- Too little saliva
- Thick saliva
- Further help

Saliva Control

Introduction

This fact sheet is aimed at those affected by MSA and experiencing difficulties with saliva control. It provides information about the possible problems and advises on what can be done to manage the symptoms.

Possible problems

Some people may experience discomfort and embarrassment due to reduced saliva control. Saliva plays an important function in the mouth. It helps break down food and protects the mouth from drying out and cracking. However, too much or too little saliva can cause problems, both with eating and drinking and with speech.

We all produce about a litre and a half of saliva every day, but in health we swallow frequently. People with MSA have a reduced swallow reflex and difficulty moving saliva from the front of the mouth to the back where it can then be swallowed.

Also there may be some increased saliva production by the autonomic nervous system.

Alternatively, saliva may be thick and difficult to swallow, and some medication can cause a drying up of saliva and a dry mouth.

What can be done?

The following advice may help depending on the nature of the saliva problem. The advice is based on medical understanding, commonly held knowledge and strategies that have helped people before.

Too much saliva

If the problem is too much saliva then a few options are available:

Food and Drink:

Some foods and drinks can help reduce saliva production. You might try:

- Ginger tea - this has a drying effect on the mouth; sucking pieces of dried ginger may help if there is no risk of choking
- Dark grape juice
- Sage
- Pineapple juice or sucking fresh pineapple has a cleansing effect on the mouth.
- Chewing gum can help stimulate regular swallow of saliva too.

Posture:

- In some cases, improving your posture can improve the problem, so try to keep your head as upright as possible at all times.

Routine:

- Remind yourself to keep your mouth closed when you are reading, listening or watching television.
- Keep some tissues or a towel handy. Dabbing at saliva rather than wiping it away will cause less irritation to the skin. Vaseline or a barrier cream may be required at the corners of the mouth to prevent them becoming sore.
- Make a point of swallowing your saliva at regular intervals e.g. every 2 minutes - your Speech Therapist can recommend a swallow reminder if you are forgetting to swallow.
- Always ensure the mouth is as clean as possible, this will reduce the amount of bacteria in the mouth.

Exercises:

Your speech therapist can advise you about a range of exercises to promote swallow and lip closure such as:

- Push lips forward as if saying 'oo'
- Spread lips as if saying 'ee'
- Repeat 'oo' 'ee' 6 times
- Puff air into your cheeks for as long as possible
- Press your lips tightly together as if saying 'mm'.

Do this series of exercises several times a day if you can and talk to your speech and language therapist about them the next time you have an appointment.

Over the counter remedies:

- Be cautious with over the counter remedies such as sea-sickness tablets or cough and cold remedies, which claim to dry up saliva. For some MSA patients these can give temporary

Saliva Control

relief, but in others can cause side effects. Discuss this with your speech therapist, nurse specialist, consultant, GP or pharmacist before proceeding.

Medication:

The following may be prescribed by your GP

- **Atropine** eye drops used under the tongue are found to be beneficial in most cases. These are used because a side effect of the eye drops is the drying of secretions. They are NOT to be used in the eyes! One to two drops up to 4 times a day. Most people find them beneficial about 30 minutes before mealtimes. They can take a few weeks to become effective, so persevere with them. Most GPs will prescribe these drops for this purpose though they are not obliged to as this use is not what they were licensed for.
- **Glycopyrronium** can be prescribed to dry out the mouth providing some temporary relief. This comes in tablet form and is usually taken up to three times a day.
- Other medications can have the beneficial side effect of reducing the amount of saliva in the mouth. An example of this is amitriptyline tablets, which can be used for pain, to aid sleep and also as an antidepressant.
- **Hyoscine** is commonly used for drying of saliva, often in a patch form. This is probably the most commonly used medication for saliva problems and so may be the choice of your GP . if you are prescribed this and experience any excessive drowsiness, confusion or hallucinations (sometimes more common in elderly people and those with MSA)_then remove the patch immediately and inform the GP .
- If all the above are ineffective and a botox injection (see below) is not an option then some neurologists try lpratropium bromide . known as Atrovent inhaler . this comes as a pump inhaler but can be sprayed directly into the mouth 2-3 times a day , again most helpfully 30 minutes before meals and at bed time.

Finally Botox injections into the salivary glands may be given by the neurologist or a specialist familiar with doing this procedure. These can be effective for some patients and treatment usually lasts 3-4 months, but can be repeated.

Too little saliva

If the problem is too little saliva then a few options are available:

Food and Drink

- Some foods can make dryness in the mouth worse. You can ask for a referral to a dietician via your GP for dietary advice.
- Ensure you are drinking enough fluids (see above). Take frequent sips of water.
- Avoid alcohol and smoking as these can both increase dryness.
- Limit sweets to sugar free as overuse can cause tooth decay.
- Chewing gum will stimulate saliva production.
- Sucking fresh or frozen pineapple cubes can be very helpful for a dry mouth. A chunk of pineapple fits neatly into an ice cube tray for freezing them.

Medication

- Discuss the use of artificial saliva (available on prescription) or alternative medication, with your GP or Neurologist.

Other

Saliva Control

- Avoid mouthwashes that contain alcohol.
- Use lip balm or vaseline to lips regularly.
- Remove dentures at night.

Thick saliva

If the problem you are having is with thick saliva then the following may help:

Food and Drink

- Ensure you are drinking enough liquids. You should aim for 1½ to 2 litres a day.
- Avoid mucus-thickening agents such as dairy products.
- Avoid caffeinated drinks and alcohol.
- Suck sugar free boiled sweets to stimulate saliva production and swallowing.
- Pineapple juice or pureed pineapple or chewing pineapple chunks will help break down thick saliva.
- Suck on crushed ice.

Other

- Steam inhalation/humidification/nebulisers can be helpful. Discuss these with your GP, nurse or pharmacist.
- A water-based gel can be spread over the lips and inside the mouth to maintain moisture at night.
- Cleaning around your mouth with a soft baby tooth brush and water or small amount of toothpaste may also help and spitting out the thick saliva.

If you have very thick saliva collecting in the back of your throat and you cannot swallow it or bring it forward to clear from your mouth with any of the above techniques then speak to your GP or District Nurse to see if you can be provided with a suction machine.

If you are concerned about anything you have read in this fact sheet then please get in touch with your MSA Nurse Specialists. Their contact details can be found overleaf.



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