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# Salivary glands and your oral health

In our last article, we highlighted the importance of saliva in maintaining oral health. Now, it is time to focus on the organs responsible for producing this vital fluid: the salivary glands, and the conditions that can compromise their function.

Humans have three main pairs of salivary glands. The largest, the parotid glands, sit in front of the ears and produce watery saliva rich in digestive enzymes. The submandibular glands, located along the inner jaw, secrete a mixture of watery and mucous saliva. The smallest major glands, the sublingual glands under the tongue, mainly produce mucous saliva that lubricates the mouth. In addition, hundreds of minor salivary glands are scattered across the lips, cheeks, palate, and throat, continuously releasing small amounts of saliva to keep tissues moist.

**Common diseases and prevention**

Despite their size, salivary glands can develop a variety of problems. Salivary gland stones, or sialolithiasis, occur when mineral deposits block the ducts, causing pain and swelling, often during meals. Infections may be bacterial, leading to pus and swelling, or viral, such as mumps, which commonly targets the parotid glands.

Autoimmune conditions such as Sjogren's syndrome cause the body to attack its own salivary glands, resulting in chronic dry mouth. Tumours, both benign and malignant, can develop and often present as lumps in the affected area. Xerostomia, or persistent dry mouth, may arise from dehydration, certain medications, or systemic illnesses, reducing saliva flow and increasing the risk of cavities.

Like many other diseases, salivary gland disorders often follow a progressive pattern, with warning signs appearing early. These may include swelling in the cheeks, jaw, or under the tongue, pain when eating or swallowing, persistent dry mouth, foul-tasting drainage, or unusual lumps in the mouth or neck.

Protecting your salivary glands is crucial for overall oral health. Drinking plenty of water helps maintain saliva production, while good oral hygiene prevents infections. Limiting alcohol and tobacco reduces gland irritation and dryness. Most importantly, seeking prompt medical attention for persistent swelling, pain, or dryness can prevent more serious complications.

Though small, salivary glands play a vital role in oral health and overall well-being. Understanding their function and recognising early signs of disease are essential steps in preventing complications. For anyone striving for a healthier smile, caring for these glands is just as important as brushing and flossing.




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