



Dentist

Dr Lincoln Tentena

What are salivary stones and what causes them?

Imagine sitting down to enjoy your favourite meal, perhaps a juicy piece of roasted chicken. Just as you take the first bite, a sharp pain shoots under your jaw. The area feels swollen, tender, and uncomfortable. This is a common experience for people with salivary stones, also known as sialoliths.

Salivary stones are small, hard lumps that form inside the ducts of the salivary glands. These glands produce saliva, which keeps your mouth moist, helps you chew and swallow food, and protects your teeth from decay. When a stone blocks a duct, saliva cannot flow freely, leading to pain and swelling, especially during meals when saliva production increases.

The exact cause of salivary stones is not always clear, but several everyday factors play a role. Dehydration makes saliva thicker, while mineral build-up in saliva, including calcium, can crystallise over time. Certain medications or illnesses may reduce saliva flow, and poor oral hygiene or chronic infections can increase the risk of stone formation.

The process of developing a salivary stone is similar to how a pipe becomes clogged. Thick or slow-flowing saliva allows minerals to settle and form tiny crystals. Over time, these crystals grow into stones. Once a stone blocks the duct, saliva backs up, causing swelling and pain. In some cases, the gland may even become infected.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the size of the stone. Small stones often pass naturally, and drinking water, sucking on sour candy, or gently massaging the gland can help push them out. Larger stones may require removal by a dentist or doctor, and in some cases, minor surgery is necessary. If the gland becomes infected, antibiotics may be prescribed.

While not all salivary stones can be prevented, simple habits can reduce the risk, such as staying hydrated, maintaining good oral hygiene, and stimulating saliva flow by chewing sugar-free gum or eating foods that encourage saliva. Avoiding habits that dry the mouth, such as smoking or excessive alcohol use, also helps keep the salivary glands healthy.

Salivary stones can be uncomfortable, but they are common and usually manageable. If you notice persistent swelling or pain under your jaw, especially when eating, do not ignore it. A dentist or doctor can provide treatment. With proper care and awareness, you can protect your salivary glands and enjoy your meals without discomfort.

