How Does Sjogren’s Affect Your Teeth?

by BARBARA LEECH

Sjogren's and Lupus: How to Grin and Bear It

Last year, I was surprised to learn from my dentist that my teeth had visible signs of decay due to lack of adequate saliva. I had not heard of this occurring with lupus, and I felt completely unnerved that this relentless disease had even affected my dental health.

I mean, is there anything it doesn't affect? Do I have to worry about my teeth, too? Apparently, yes.

My dentist had found unusual surface decay caused by a lack of saliva. The condition is called Sjögren's syndrome, and though it can occur alone, it is commonly associated with autoimmune diseases, most commonly lupus or rheumatoid arthritis. Read on to learn more about Sjogren's and lupus.

Knowing the Signs

The dentist asked me if I felt that my mouth was dry. Until that moment, I had not considered it a big issue that my throat and mouth felt bone-dry in the middle of the night.

I would guzzle some water, and eventually, it felt a little less shriveled. I blamed the heating system in the winter and allergies in the summer. I ignored it. There were, in fact, a few signs that I should have been looking for:

- A feeling of dry mouth that was worse at night.
- A lack of saliva, even when eating.
- Trouble swallowing and at times talking without drinking water first.
- Dry eyes, since that is affected by Sjögren's too.

As it turns out, the eye doctor had already told me about my eyes being too dry for my contact lenses, and he had put me on special eye drops six months prior — I didn't realize lupus dry eyes were a symptom. I had also experienced almost choking on food on several occasions because of a very dry feeling as I tried to swallow.

But, at that point, I was dealing with other health complications. I was being examined by a neurologist for possible multiple sclerosis (MS) at the time, so the difficulty swallowing (and decrease in my ability to taste) while eating was connected to the MS symptoms I had (feeling weak, shaky and impaired vision when in extreme heat or full sun), not for Sjögren's and lupus. In the long run, I was pretty much cleared of having MS, and nobody seemed to connect the dots that lupus could be the root cause of all those dry mouth difficulties until I saw the dentist.

Wet Your Whistle

When your saliva production is cut off, it can affect your ease in talking, chewing and swallowing, but more concern is that saliva serves as a natural cavity-fighter by washing away food particles and plaque and working as

a buffer to the acids from certain foods.

Essentially, it is important to have a healthy mouth, forming a protective barrier around your teeth and protecting gums from infection and allowing your taste buds to function properly. But there are things I do to fight back:

- **Lubricating mouthwash:** My dentist recommended that I use Biotene mouthwash. It's available over-the-counter, and it provides lubricating moisture like your own saliva. I use it before bedtime. He also prescribed a special toothpaste to help protect my enamel and fight decay.
- **Drink plenty of water:** I drink water all day, and this not only hydrates me, but it flushes out my mouth of any particles or residual sugar from foods.
- **Eat foods that require lots of chewing or provide moisture:** I chew on celery with a tiny bit of peanut butter. The more I chew something, the more likely my mouth is to produce more saliva. For moisture, watermelon and cucumber salad refreshes my entire mouth.
- **Brush often:** Because the lack of adequate saliva means there is nothing naturally cleaning off my teeth, I make sure to brush after eating when I can.
- **Mother Nature knows best:** The local natural pharmacy offers an oral health tonic made with thyme, cranberry fruit, cinnamon bark, clove and peppermint leaf. I use a dropper mixed with two ounces of water whenever my mouth is excessively dry, and water does not seem to help.