



Dentist

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Saliva: The unsung hero of oral health

When we think about oral health, brushing and flossing usually come to mind. Yet one of the most powerful protectors of our mouths is something we rarely acknowledge: saliva. This clear fluid, produced by the salivary glands, plays a vital role in keeping our teeth, gums, and overall oral environment healthy.

Why saliva matters

Although saliva is made up of more than 99 percent water, the small remaining fraction is packed with essential substances. Electrolytes such as sodium, potassium, calcium, and bicarbonate help maintain the mouth's pH balance and support tooth remineralisation. Proteins and enzymes such as amylase and lipase begin the process of digestion by breaking down starches and fats, while mucins provide lubrication, forming a protective coating over oral tissues to guard against trauma. Saliva also contains antimicrobial compounds that fight harmful bacteria, reducing the risk of infections and bad breath.

Saliva performs multiple critical functions. It protects teeth and gums by neutralizing acids that cause cavities and aids digestion by breaking down food, making swallowing easier. By keeping the mouth moist and flexible, it supports speech, while also washing away food particles and controlling bacterial growth to prevent infections. Some proteins in saliva even help repair oral tissues, promoting healing after minor injuries in the mouth.

Keeping saliva healthy

Maintaining healthy saliva is key to its protective benefits. Staying hydrated by drinking plenty of water ensures a steady flow of saliva, while a balanced diet rich in vitamins and minerals, especially calcium, supports its protective role.

Limiting sugary snacks is also important, as excess sugar fuels bacteria that saliva works hard to combat. Using Xylitol-sweetened lollipops or chewing gum can stimulate saliva production while protecting teeth.

Avoiding tobacco and excessive alcohol is equally crucial, as both can dry out the mouth and reduce saliva flow. Practicing good oral hygiene through regular brushing and flossing helps saliva perform its job more effectively. For those experiencing persistent dry mouth, or xerostomia, seeking medical advice is important, as it can signal underlying health issues or side effects from medication.

Though often overlooked, saliva is one of the body's most effective natural defenses. By keeping it healthy through proper hydration, diet, and oral care, we strengthen our teeth, gums, and overall well-being.

In Uganda, where oral health challenges are common, understanding and appreciating the role of saliva can make a significant difference in preventing dental problems and promoting healthier smiles.

