

## **Saliva is Your Friend**

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The health of your mouth is a balancing act with many factors having an effect. What you eat, when you eat, how you eat, when and how you perform oral hygiene measures, and your overall body health are just a few of the things that have a role in your oral health. Undoubtedly one of the most important influences that is often taken for granted is your saliva. It's many roles are vital to the health of your mouth and your body.

The initial role of saliva is that of a lubricant during the chewing process. Without it our teeth wouldn't pass as easily through the food which would then be more likely to stick to our teeth. It also forms a protective barrier on our gums, mucosa, and cheeks thus protecting them from mechanical, thermal, and chemical trauma. This lubricating effect extends to the food itself since our saliva acts to moisten many foods to make it easier to swallow them.

Saliva is also responsible for getting more enjoyment from our food, and in beginning the digestive process. Taste can be one of our most pleasurable senses and is greatly enhanced by saliva. As food is chewed it begins to be dissolved in the saliva, which acts as the medium in which the flavors of the food are presented to the taste buds. In addition, enzymes present in the saliva begin to break food down and initiate the process of digesting the food and extracting the vital nutrients it contains. So without the presence of saliva food wouldn't taste as good and wouldn't provide as much nutrition.

Saliva also plays an important role in the health of the mouth and the body as a whole. Through the simple process of swallowing saliva acts to help clear problem causing bacteria from the mouth, thus reducing their ability to cause oral health problems. In addition, there are many ingredients in saliva that have antimicrobial effects. They can outright destroy bacteria, make it harder for the bacteria to adhere to the teeth, or interfere with the bacteria's ability to metabolize carbohydrates and thus produce harmful acids.

One of the most important roles of saliva is protecting our teeth from the effects of these harmful acids, which are made by bacteria present in everyone's mouth when they metabolize any fermentable carbohydrate. The initial role of saliva is to neutralize the acid through the buffering capacity provided by the carbonate and phosphate it contains. This helps to limit the amount of minerals lost from the teeth which, if left unchecked, is how a cavity is formed. Finally, this loss of minerals is counteracted by the remineralizing capacity of saliva. It acts as a reservoir of calcium and phosphate particles that act to replace some of the minerals lost from the teeth. The importance of these two roles of saliva – neutralizing acids and remineralizing the teeth – is clearly evident in the damage seen in patients who have compromised flow of saliva due to disease, chemotherapy, radiation treatment, and medications.

Though often taken for granted, the role of saliva in our oral and overall health is undeniable. If you would like more information on this topic ask your dentist or visit the consumer area of the American Dental Association website at [ADA.org](http://ADA.org). Thank you for taking the time to read this article, and have a great day.