



Do You Have Dry Eye Syndrome?

What it Is, Why You Have it & How to Stay Comfortable

We've all experienced dry eyes. You go to a ball game on a hot, windy day. By the time you get home, your eyes feel raw. Or you attend a party where clouds of cigarette smoke hang over the guests. Maybe you wear your contact lenses for longer than you should. Or, like many of us, you sit at a computer for several hours without blinking often enough. The result: tired, dry eyes.

Anything in the environment that irritates eyes can cause temporary dryness. Not blinking often enough can also dry your eyes out. Whenever you're involved in a visually intense activity, such as reading, working on a computer, making crafts or sewing, you tend to blink less often. The fewer times you blink, the dryer your eyes become.

Each time we blink (automatically, about every 5 seconds) our efficient eye cleansing system takes over. Ducts at the sides of each eye continually release tears. Then, like windshield wipers, the eyelids sweep the tears evenly across the eye surface. Dust and debris are cleaned away and eyes are kept comfortably moisturized.

When Eyes Are Always Dry

For some people, dry eye is chronic. It's not caused by the environment, but by the eye's inability to produce enough tears. Sometimes dry eye results when the eyes produce poor-quality tears that leave the eye too quickly. If the tear mixture of water, oil and mucus is not quite right, you may develop chronic dry eye.

Dry eye syndrome is a common problem. In the U.S. about 6 million women and 3 million men have moderate or severe symptoms of dry eye. About 20 million to 30 million additional people have mild symptoms.

To treat environmental causes of dryness, doctors recommend:

- Wearing wraparound sunglasses when outdoors to protect eyes from the wind.
- Taking breaks from reading or doing close work so eyes can re-moisturize.
- Adjusting your computer monitor so that it is just below eye level.
- Avoiding smoke-filled areas.

Chronic dry eye syndrome can occur at any age, and in people who are otherwise healthy. It is most common, however, among those over age 40. We all produce fewer tears as we get older. Without enough tears to moisturize the eyes, they can become dry and easily irritated. Post-menopausal women are at the greatest risk because of their decreased hormone levels.

Others at risk include contact lens wearers and those who have had surgery on their eyes or eyelids. Dry eye may be caused by a disease. Or it may occur as a side effect of certain medications.

Most people with dry eye are uncomfortable, but have no vision loss or other complications. If left untreated, however, symptoms may worsen over time, resulting in eye inflammation, infection or damage to the cornea (the front surface of the eye).

Talk to Your Eye Care Provider

Make an appointment with your eye doctor if your eyes are dry even after the source of the irritation is gone. Tell him or her if you have any of these symptoms:

- Reduced ability to see well
- Stinging or burning sensation
- Feeling of dryness, grittiness or soreness
- Itching, redness or tearing
- Eye fatigue after reading for only a short period
- Sensitivity to light, smoke or wind
- Blurred or double vision

Your doctor will select a treatment based on the symptoms you describe and on special tear tests. For one test, a dye is placed in your eye to make the tears more visible. By viewing them under a special light, the doctor can detect whether a chemical imbalance is preventing tears from staying in the eye.

Your provider may also measure the speed at which your eyes produce tears by placing a paper wick on your eyelid to collect moisture.

Soothing Remedies

There are several ways to treat chronically dry eyes:

Artificial tears. Non-prescription eye drops are the most common treatment. Be aware that eye drops promising to “get the red out” will not relieve dryness. If you have chronic dry eye, it is important to use the drops even when your eyes feel fine, to keep them lubricated. If your eyes dry out while you sleep, you can use a thicker lubricant, such as an ointment, at night.

Prescription eye drops. A solution called Restasis soothes eyes and actually helps increase tear production.

Dietary supplements. Some doctors recommend that their dry eye patients take omega-3 nutritional supplements, which may change the chemical makeup of your tears. This helps if your tear mixture is not quite right, causing tears to leave the eye too quickly.

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Moisturizing insert. A small insert filled with a lubricating ingredient may be placed just inside the lower eyelid, where it provides relief from dryness all day.

Tear-duct plugs. To prevent tears from draining too soon from the eye, tiny temporary or permanent plugs can be fitted into the tear ducts.

Surgery. In rare cases, a problem with your eyelids may prevent them from spreading tears evenly across the eyes. Surgery may be required to correct the problem.

The most important way to keep your eyes healthy is to have them examined regularly by your eye care provider and communicate your symptoms and concerns. Don't take chances with your eye health!

Sources: Ocular Surgery News, All About Vision, Medline Plus, OptometryCARE



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