

What is dry eye?

Dry eye occurs when there is a problem with the tear film that normally keeps the eye moist and lubricated. Both eyes are usually affected and they may not actually feel dry.

Dry eye can affect anyone, but it becomes more common with increasing age. It affects about 15 to 33 in 100 people and women are affected much more often than men.

What causes dry eye?

Ageing. You tend to make fewer tears as you get older. In particular, some women notice dry eye developing after the menopause.

Medication. Some medicines sometimes have a side-effect of causing dry eye, or make dry eye worse. These include:

- 'Water' tablets
- Some antidepressants
- Antihistamines
- Some treatments for anxiety and other psychological problems
- Beta-blockers such as propranolol
- Some treatments for acne
- Some eye drops used to treat other eye conditions

This is not an exhaustive list. Therefore, ask your pharmacist or doctor if you suspect that a medicine is causing your dry eye.

Illness. Some people develop dry eye as a symptom of a more general disease. In these

situations you would normally have other symptoms in other parts of the body.

Increased evaporation of tears. This may be due to:

- Low humidity - for example, from central heating or air conditioning
- Low blink rate, often combined with opening your eyes wider than normal. For example, spending a long time looking at a computer, TV or microscope. Also people with Parkinson's disease can blink less
- Wearing contact lenses
- Windy conditions when you are outside
- Not being able to cover the eyes completely when closing the eyelids. For example, due to eye problems that some people have related to thyroid disease. Also, some people sleep with their eyes partly open.

Damage to the outer part of the eyes or eyelids from disease, injury or surgery

Skin rashes such as seborrhoeic dermatitis or rosacea

Inflammation of the eyelids (blepharitis), which is often associated with dry eye

Unknown. Some younger people have no apparent cause. They simply produce less than the normal amount of tears

What are the symptoms of dry eyes?

- Irritation in the eyes. The eyes may feel gritty or burning. However, the eyes do not

go red. If they do, another eye problem or a complication may be present

- Slight blurring of vision from time to time. However, dry eye does not affect the seeing part of the eye, and does not usually cause permanent damage to vision
- Discomfort in your eyes when looking at bright lights
- If you wear contact lenses, you may find they become uncomfortable.

You may experience other symptoms that are not normally symptoms of dry eye and may indicate another eye condition or a complication of dry eye. Therefore, contact your doctor if:

- Your eye goes red or if your vision becomes affected (more than slight temporary blurring)
- Eye pain develops other than the grittiness or irritation that goes with dry eyes.

What is the treatment for dry eyes?

Artificial tears

- These come as eye drops and gels, and can be bought from pharmacies
- At first, you may need to use them every hour or more to improve symptoms
- Once symptoms improve, you may then only need to use them three or four times a day.

Note: some types of artificial tears contain preservatives such as benzalkonium chloride.

If you use drops that contain this preservative for long periods, they may damage the front of the eye. Therefore, if you use artificial tears more than four times per day long-term, it is best to use a preservative-free brand which does not contain benzalkonium chloride. Or, if the artificial tears you are using cause irritation in your eyes, try changing to a type which is preservative-free.

Also, contact lenses cannot be used with many types of eye drops. Check with your local pharmacist or doctor for advice. It is often the preservative in the drops that may cause problems. Some types of drops are available without preservative, which are suitable for contact lens wearers.

Eye ointments

- These can also be bought from pharmacies
- They provide a soothing and lubricating effect and should be used at bedtime
- Do not use during the day as they may make the artificial tear drops less effective, and can blur vision
- Do not use whilst wearing contact lenses
- Do not use if you use other eye drops for other conditions. The other eye drops may not work so well on top of an ointment.

Although artificial tears and soothing ointments work well in most cases, other treatments may be considered by your doctor in severe cases.

Further advice

- Limit the use of contact lenses
- If using a computer for long periods, ensure that the monitor is at or below eye level, avoid staring at the screen, and take frequent breaks to close/blink eyes
- Using a humidifier to moisten ambient air



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