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UNDERSTANDING DRY EYE

What is dry eye?

You may not know that you shed tears every day of your life. These tears are not caused by sadness or pain. They are natural tears that protect the eyes and give them moisture that is necessary for clear and comfortable vision. Some people are unable to produce enough of these everyday tears, leaving the eyes dry and easily irritated. In this condition, blinking does not leave a moist "tear film" to wash and soothe the eye. The irritation and discomfort that results may make a difference in one's ability to see. In rare cases, dry eye can become serious—even blinding—without proper care and treatment.

Are some people more likely to get dry eye than others?

The disorder affects millions of Americans. Ninety percent of them are women and almost all of them are adults. It is more common in pregnant and post-menopausal women.

What are the causes?

It is not clear why some people are not able to produce enough natural tears. One cause of dry eye is Sjogren's Syndrome, a disease involving mild to extreme dryness in both the eyes and the mouth. This disorder may be connected with menopause and arthritis. Dry eye may also be caused by other eye diseases, certain medications such as antihistamines, and as a side effect of long-term contact lens wear or refractive surgery.

What are the symptoms?

People with dry eye complain of feeling burning or stinging; of particles in the eye; a gritty, sandy feeling; itchiness; redness and inflammation; stringy mucus; and extreme sensitivity, especially to cigarette smoke. These symptoms, however, don't always mean you have dry eye.

How can I relieve the discomfort?

Founded in 1908, Prevent Blindness America is the nation's leading volunteer eye health and safety organization dedicated to fighting blindness and saving sight. Focused on promoting a continuum of vision care, Prevent Blindness America touches the lives of millions of people each year through public and professional education, advocacy, certified vision screening training, community and patient service programs and research.

Any pharmacy carries over-the-counter tear replacements called “artificial tears.” These eyedrops may replace badly needed moisture and provide proper lubrication for normal eye functioning. Artificial tears come in various brands that have different ingredients, including preservatives. Ask an eye care professional to recommend an artificial tear solution and give you guidance on how often to use it. Ointments can be used before bedtime to make sure your eyes stay moist during the night.

Frequent use of these preparations, for long periods of time, may cause toxic irritation or even allergic reactions. That is why it is important to talk with an eye care professional first.

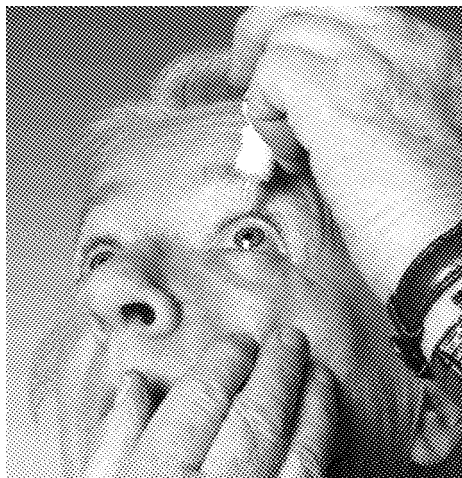
What can I do to avoid irritation?

The use of a humidifier to keep natural

moisture in the air may help dry eyes. Hair dryers, harsh winds, overly warm rooms and cigarette smoke should be avoided whenever possible. Goggles that cling around the eyes also help lower the evaporation of the eye’s natural moisture. Extra drops of artificial tears may be needed in climates with low humidity, in air conditioning, and in airplanes or cars when the heater or defroster is on.

What can help me?

It’s important to know that over-the-counter tear replacement solutions are not a treatment for dry eye, although they can lessen the symptoms. Dry eye is often misdiagnosed and can cause serious damage to the eye’s cornea. To avoid such harmful results, patients who think they have dry eye should visit a qualified eye care professional.



**Call the PBA Vision Health Resource Center
at 1-800-331-2020 for more information.**

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