

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 risk of Dry Eye increases with age. Other risk factors include patients who have undergone refractive surgery (LASIK), have severe allergies, are on certain medications, or are contact lens wearers. Those with rheumatoid arthritis and other diseases are also at increased risk. Women are also more likely to develop Dry Eye. Approximately 6 million women and 3 million men have moderate to severe symptoms of Dry Eye. Women who are pregnant, on certain types of birth control, hormone replacement therapy or experiencing menopause also have increased rates of Dry Eye.

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.



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Understanding Dry Eye—Continued

How can I relieve the discomfort?

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. Also, when using a computer, remember to blink often and give eyes a rest from staring at the screen, apply a warm washcloth to soothe irritated eyes, and do not use harsh soaps or cleansers on around the eye area.

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.

