

Dry eyes



Dry eyes are caused when there is not enough protective, lubricating liquid ('tears'), or the lubricating liquid does not work properly. Dry eyes occur more commonly as people get older.

Symptoms

Dry eyes feel tired, scratchy and uncomfortable. Other symptoms can include:

- redness with stinging, burning or itchiness of the eyes
- sensitivity to strong light
- rubbing the eyes frequently
- a watery discharge that may be clear or contain cloudy mucus
- having difficulty focusing (blurry vision) while reading or driving.

Causes

Dry eyes can be caused by:

- not blinking often enough (e.g. by staring at electronic devices for too long)
- very dry air (e.g. from air-conditioning)
- irritation from wearing contact lenses
- irritants such as cigarette smoke, dust or chemicals
- trauma to the eye (including burns)
- inflammation of the eyelids (blepharitis)
- some medicines (e.g. antihistamines, diuretics and some antidepressants)
- some medical conditions (e.g. diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, scleroderma, Sjogren's syndrome, thyroid disorders or vitamin A deficiency).

Speak to your doctor or pharmacist if you are uncertain of the cause of dry eyes because symptoms of unrelated infection or allergy can be similar to dry eye.

Dry eyes can sometimes cause redness in the eye, however redness may also be due to an inflammation in the conjunctiva (the clear thin layer over the whites of your eyes). Redness may also be due to an infection (refer to *Conjunctivitis* or *Hay fever* Health Information Brochures).

Dryness is a common cause of discomfort in contact lens wearers.

Lifestyle options

You can manage the symptoms of dry eyes by:

- blinking often and taking regular breaks from operating digital devices
- avoiding conditions that aggravate dry eyes such as air-conditioning
- avoiding using hair dryers too close to the eyes
- limiting time spent in bright lighting, sun and wind – use wrap around glasses when outside
- using goggles when swimming
- quitting smoking (see *Quit smoking* Health Information Brochure).

Pharmacy Options

Always inform pharmacy staff if you are taking any other medicines, or if you have any other health conditions, because some over-the-counter medicines may not be suitable for you.

Artificial tears and lubricants can re-build and stabilise the tear film and soothe the eyes. Artificial tears may provide more than transient relief, and while longer lasting improvement of symptoms should occur within a week of regular use, it may take up to a month for some people. Your pharmacist can advise on the best product for you:

Demulcent (soothing) eye preparations can supplement and stabilise the tear film. They are available as eye drops, eye ointments, eye gels, or sprays or wipes. Drops are easiest to use, but gels may be used if your eyes are very dry. Use ointments at bed-time, as they can affect vision.

Phospholipid containing treatments are also available as a topical spray that is sprayed onto the closed eye. The liquid adheres to the eyelashes which then provides a longer duration of action for symptom relief.

Preservative-free products are recommended for patients who wear contact lenses or are sensitive to preservatives. Most dry eye treatments require multiple administrations during the day, and frequent use of products containing preservatives can worsen dry eyes because many of the preservatives are surfactants that cause more rapid breakdown of the tears produced.

Your pharmacist can help determine the cause of your dry eyes by asking you questions. They may recommend decongestant eye drops or antihistamine eye drops if it is due to allergies. Antibacterial eye drops may be needed if there is an infection.

Ask your pharmacist for advice on the most suitable treatment for you.

There are special techniques for safely using eye drops or ointments in adults and children. Ask your pharmacist for more information.

See a doctor or optometrist if:

- the symptoms do not improve with the recommended treatment
- the eyelids are very inflamed or there is cloudy mucus
- the eyes are painful or vision is badly affected
- there are symptoms of dry mouth, dizziness, nausea or severe headache
- there is clouding of the eye surface (cornea), or the pupil is an irregular shape
- there is something stuck in the eye
- symptoms are due to any medicines or medical conditions.

More information

Health Direct: www.healthdirect.gov.au

NPS: www.nps.org.au

Disclaimer: The information provided is a guide only, is current at time of publishing, and is not intended to replace the advice of your pharmacist or doctor.

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