

Dry eye syndrome

Dry eye syndrome is not a macular condition. It is not the same as dry age-related macular degeneration.

Dry eyes occur when there are not enough tears to keep the front of your eyes (the cornea) lubricated, or when the tears that are produced do not spread evenly across the eyes. Your eyes may feel tired, sore or gritty, be itchy, red, more watery than usual and more sensitive towards light.

Common causes include:

- Wearing contact lenses
- Activities that reduce blinking e.g. computer screens.
- It's windy, cold, dry or dusty.
- Medications including losec, zoton, frusemide, diuretics, anti-hypertensives (these drugs do not harm your eyes).
- Medical conditions including diabetes.
- Other conditions such as blepharitis, Sjögren's syndrome or Lupus.
- Sometimes as a temporary phenomenon after cataract surgery.

How to treat dry eyes yourself

- Keep your eyes clean.
- Take regular screen breaks.
- Make sure your computer screen is eye level to avoid strain.
- Use a humidifier to stop the air getting dry.
- Get plenty of sleep.
- If you wear contact lenses, take them out and use your glasses to rest your eyes.

How to keep your eyes clean:

1. Soak a flannel in warm (not hot) water and gently press it on the area around your eyes. This makes the oil produced by the glands around your eyes more runny.
2. Gently massage your eyelids with your finger or a cotton bud. This pushes the oils out of the glands.
3. Clean your eyelids by soaking cotton wool in warm (not hot) water and gently wipe away any excess oil, crusts, bacteria, dust or grime that might have built up.

Some people develop dry eyes after an allergic reaction or infective conjunctivitis. If you have had one of these conditions and were given drops, the drops themselves may temporarily cause dry eyes. At the beginning of treatment for severely dry eyes, avoid drops containing preservatives.

To make your eyes feel comfortable, you need to replenish the natural tear film that protects the surface of your eyes. Four types of product listed below are available and are generally considered harmless. They do not contain any drugs and merely lubricate the surface of the eye. Your doctor can prescribe them or your pharmacist can advise you.

Tear drops

These are simple salt solutions with added ingredients, which help them spread across the eye. They make the eye more comfortable by lubricating the surface but the effect does not last very long. Different drops may well suit different eyes, so you may have to try different types.

They are not very effective overnight and your eyes may be uncomfortable when you wake up. If your eyes remain sore, other types of product below may help.

Eye gels

Gel preparations last longer than drops and usually do not cause misty vision. They can be used at bedtime as they last partly through the night.

Eye ointments

These are thicker and greasier than eye drops and stay in the eye much longer. Try using them last thing at night as during the day they may cause misty vision.

Tear drops without preservatives

These are particularly useful for people with very dry eyes or for people with allergies.

Most eye drops and ointments should be used within four weeks of being opened. If your symptoms recur, do not use old products.

Blepharitis

If your lashes become slightly crusty and your eyelids stick when you blink or wake up, this may be due to Blepharitis. This may be associated with skin conditions such as eczema. The eyelid glands which help tears spread evenly across the eye become blocked and then inflamed.

With Blepharitis use only your own facecloth and towel and avoid using makeup. Your GP, optometrist or ophthalmologist can advise. It is not usually serious.

Keratitis

In severe cases of untreated dry eye syndrome or cases that do not respond well to treatment, the inflammation can make the cornea vulnerable to ulceration and infection, which is potentially sight-threatening. This is frequently associated with pain and needs medical attention.