

# Contending with Chronic "Dry Eye"

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**H**ave your eyes ever felt irritated, itchy, red or just uncomfortable? Do your contact lenses bother you in the late afternoon? Do you have to blink several times while you sit in front of the computer? If you answered "yes" to any or all of these questions, then you may have dry eyes.

Chronic dry eye (keratoconjunctivitis sicca), also known as Dry Eye Syndrome, is a medical condition that can result from the eyes' reduced ability to produce its natural tears. The natural tears that your eyes produce are composed of three layers: Outer oily layer, middle watery layer and inner mucus layer. The tear film functions to protect your eyes and lubricate them. They also reduce the risk of eye infection and helps clear your eyes of any debris. Any decreased production of fluids from your tear glands can destabilize the tear film, causing irritation and blurred vision. Unfortunately, dry eyes are a common source of visual discomfort and left untreated, becomes a chronic problem.

## Symptoms

- A stinging, burning or scratchy sensation in your eyes
- A sense of a foreign substance in your eyes
- Stringy mucus in or around your eyes
- Increased eye irritation from smoke or wind
- Eye fatigue after short periods of reading
- Sensitivity to light
- Difficulty wearing contact lenses

## Causes

- Poor tear quality
- Decreased tear production
- Poor lid function, i.e. incomplete closure of the eyelids
- Medications, i.e. diuretics, allergy medications, birth control pills, antidepressants, sleeping pill
- Excessive exposure to many environmental conditions, i.e. sun, wind, high altitude, dry climate, hot blowing air
- Systemic diseases such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, rosacea or Sjogren's syndrome
- Long-term contact lens wear
- Hormone fluctuations in women
- Smoking
- Natural aging process (i.e. our eyes tend to become increasingly dry – to varying degrees – as we age)

## Treatment options

- **Adding tears** (i.e. artificial tears are usually the first step, your eye doctor would recommend the best one for you)
- **Managing eyelid problems** (i.e. if you have incomplete eyelid

closure or an anatomic abnormality, your doctor may refer you to an eye surgeon specializing in plastic surgery of the eyelid. If the eyelids are inflamed due to blocked eyelid glands, regular lid cleaning or short-term bout of antibiotics drops, ointment or oral antibiotic may be in order).

- **Conserving tears** (i.e. via ways to partially or completely close your tear drainage ducts). This can be done temporarily or permanently, with collagen or silicon plugs. By closing the tear drainage ducts, this will serve to keep your natural tears around longer. A quick and painless procedure, temporary punctal plugs are typically considered a first approach to check for any improvement.
- **Medication** (i.e. your doctor may prescribe Restasis, the only medication approved by the FDA for chronic dry eyes). Restasis decreases inflammation on the eye surface and helps increase production of healthy tears. Also, unconfirmed evidence suggests that a diet high in Omega-3 fatty acids may lower the risk of dry eyes.

If you are currently experiencing dry eye, there are some simple measures you can take to minimize its effects. Avoid air blowing directly in your eyes. During cold winters and hot summers, do not direct car heaters and fans toward your eyes. Remember to wear sunglasses when outdoors or on windy days. Keep a humidifier in your house or office to add moisture to dry indoor air. Instill artificial tears prior to visually demanding activities. Finally, remember to blink. Consistent blinking helps spread your own tears more evenly, thus reducing any visual discomfort or risk of diminished vision.

If you are considering LASIK, be aware that dry eyes should be treated prior to having surgery because dry eyes can increase your risk for poor healing after the procedure.

If left untreated, dry eye can result in more than mere irritation or discomfort. Excessive dry eye can damage eye tissue and possibly scar the cornea. Consult an eye care professional to determine if you have dry eyes and which treatment would best suit your condition. Your eye doctor can perform dry eye tests using diagnostic instruments and special dyes to evaluate the quality, amount and distribution of tears. Since the solution may be one or a combination of the above treatments, it's important to seek the advice of an eye care professional, to keep your eyes healthy and protect your good vision. **HB**

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