

Are your eyes bothering you?

It could be dry eye or ocular allergy.

What is dry eye?

Dry eye is a disorder of the tear ducts and ocular surface that prevents the eye from producing enough quality tears to keep the eye moist.

Tears contain a precise balance of water, mucous, oil, nutrients and antibodies to nourish the eye and protect it from infection. When this balance is disrupted, dry eye occurs. The smooth oil layer helps to prevent evaporation of the water layer, and the mucous layer allows the tears to spread evenly and adhere to the surface of the eye. If the tears evaporate too quickly, or do not spread evenly across the front surface of the eye, dry eye can occur. The tear film is spread over the eye by blinking. Tears provide lubrication, wash away foreign matter and protect the eyes from infection. Most people have a sufficient quantity and quality of tears to adequately lubricate and nourish the tissues of the ocular surface. Inflammation of the ocular structures plays a key role in many patients with a dysfunctional tear film.



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Symptoms of dry eye are:

- Dryness
- Excess watering
- Gritty/scratchy/sandy feeling
- The sensation that there is a foreign body in the eye
- Burning
- Sticky eyelids when you wake up
- Blurred vision

It may seem confusing that watering of the eyes can be a symptom of dry eyes. This occurs when the tear quality is poor due to a lack in the oil and mucous portions. Without these portions to hold the tears onto the ocular surface, the tears will run out of the eye and onto your face.

What causes dry eye?

Dry eye develops with age and is a common complaint of post-menopausal woman due to hormonal changes. It is also common in people with allergies. Office workers who spend a lot of time on the computer complain of ocular dryness. This occurs because people tend to blink less while staring at their computer. Some people who have undergone LASIK eye surgery have complaints of dry eye. Many contact lens patients stop wearing their contacts due to dryness and discomfort. Your eye doctor can discuss the new generation of high-oxygen transmissible contact lenses that are available. Prescription medications can cause dry eye, including some high blood pressure medications, antihistamines, antidepressants and pain pills.

Dry eye can also develop with common systemic conditions such as:

- Rheumatoid arthritis
- Lupus
- Thyroid disease
- Acne rosacea
- Diabetes
- Sjogren's disease

Treating dry eye

The most common treatment for dry eye is the use of artificial tears to help replenish the tear film. Artificial tears come in liquid form or gel form for nighttime use. There are many different brands available over-the-counter that can be recommended by your eye doctor. Taking an oral omega-3, fatty-acid supplement can improve tear quality. You should decrease your intake of caffeine and stop smoking, as both cause dehydration that can lead to dry eye. When inflammation or infection of the eyelids is contributing to the problem, your eye care provider will discuss lid-cleaning techniques and may prescribe drops to alleviate the problem. Poor eyelid hygiene can contribute to dry eye. It may also be helpful to avoid windy environments and place a humidifier in your home or office. You can discuss with your doctor the possibility of inserting punctal plugs. The plugs close off the small drainage holes (punctum) that are located in the inner corner of the upper and lower eyelids. This enables your eyes to make better use of the small amount of tears that you have.

What is ocular allergy?

Many visits to the eye doctor are triggered by the discomfort of ocular allergy. Some people have difficulty sleeping and concentrating because of their allergies. The main symptom of ocular allergy is itching, while other symptoms include burning, tearing, a foreign body sensation, a pinkish/red appearance of the conjunctiva (pink eye), lid swelling and a mucous discharge. It is also not unusual to have a combination of ocular and nasal symptoms, as in patients with hay fever.

What causes ocular allergy?

Allergic conjunctivitis can be caused by:

- Trees, grass, pollen
- Pet hair and dander
- Dust
- Mold
- Coming into contact with ingredients in eye drops, contact lens solutions and facial creams

When an allergen comes into contact with the eye, the tear film will wash away some or all of the allergen. If the tear film is insufficient, mast cells in the eyelids break down causing a release of histamine, which causes the redness, swelling and itching. Some patients may treat their symptoms with over-the-counter eye drops or oral medications. Some of these medications can actually worsen the symptoms because they have a drying effect on the eye, which will reduce the washing away of the allergens.

Treating ocular allergies

The first step in managing allergies is to avoid exposure to the allergen when possible. It is important not to rub your eyes because that actually worsens the allergic response of the eye. You should shower and wash your hair before sleeping to remove the allergens from your body. Artificial tears will dilute the allergen that is on the ocular surface. Cold compresses will help relieve symptoms.

If your ocular allergy is uncomfortable and is affecting your daily life, you should contact your eye doctor. If self-treating with over-the-counter eye drops, be cautious as some of these drops will cause ocular redness with long-term use. There is a new generation of prescription eye drops that offer immediate relief to your itchy eyes and will stabilize the allergic response. These drops are called antihistamine/mast cell stabilizers. If the allergy is severe, your eye care provider may need to take a more aggressive approach by prescribing a mild steroid eye drop to reduce the inflammation. These drops are extremely safe. Once the inflammation is reduced, the steroid eye drop will be discontinued and replaced by the antihistamine/mast-cell stabilizer. Your doctor will schedule follow-up visits to monitor your ocular health. Many patients who have ocular allergies may also be taking oral antihistamines for stuffy noses and sinuses. These drugs can cause ocular dryness, which may increase the ocular allergy response.

The eye is affected by the overall health of the entire body. When your eyes are not comfortable, you should give your optometrist or ophthalmologist the opportunity to diagnose and treat the problem. Dry eye and ocular allergy exhibit a variety of clinical expressions. There is not one treatment that will meet the needs of every patient. There is no need to suffer when the new generation of eye drops can provide relief. Only your eye doctor can diagnose your problem by taking a thorough history and evaluating the clinical findings during the comprehensive eye exam. Your doctor will educate you about your condition and explain the necessity for monitoring. Dry eye and ocular allergy are chronic medical problems requiring a long-term treatment plan. If left untreated, they can lead to conditions that are more serious and affect your quality of life.

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