

Dry eye syndrome

This Eye Casualty advice sheet explains what dry eye syndrome is and how it is managed. If you have any queries, please speak to your doctor or nurse.

What is dry eye syndrome?

Dry eye syndrome is one of the most common problems treated by eye specialists. It is usually caused by a problem with the quality of the tear film that lubricates the eyes. Dry eye syndrome can affect anyone, but it is more common with increasing age.

The tear film is made up of three layers, secreted by glands in the eyelids and around the eye. This film keeps the front surface of the eye moist, preventing cell damage, providing oxygen and nutrients to the cornea. It also reduces the growth of bacteria.

Tears are also produced as a reflex to injury and emotion. However, these reflex tears do little to soothe a dry eye, so it is possible to have watery eyes yet still experience the discomfort of dry eye syndrome.

What causes dry eye syndrome?

- **Ageing** – as we grow older, our bodies produce less oil and this affects the tear film by allowing more evaporation of the watery tears – leaving dry areas on the cornea.
- **Menopause** – after the menopause, some women may experience dry eye problems due to hormonal changes.
- **Illness** – some people develop dry eyes as a symptom of more general disease, e.g. arthritis, SLE and Sjogren's syndrome.
- **Medication** – some medicines taken for other conditions may cause dry eyes or make dry eyes worse. These include diuretics (water tablets), antihistamines, antidepressants etc. If you suspect your medication is causing your dry eyes, speak to your GP.
- **External factors** – hot, dry or windy climates, high altitudes, air-conditioning, using PCs, close work, contact lenses and cigarette smoke can also cause dry eyes.

- **Damage** – to the outer part of the eyes, eyelids etc from disease, injury or surgery.
- **Unknown causes** – some younger people have reduced tear film and dry eye syndrome for no apparent reason.

What are the signs and symptoms?

- Redness and irritation.
- Burning or itchy eyes.
- Blurred vision that improves with blinking.
- Excessive watering.
- Increased discomfort after periods of reading, watching TV or working on a computer.

What treatment is available?

Treatment depends upon the individual. Your eye specialist may recommend any or a combination of the following:

- **Using artificial tears** on a regular basis. Various artificial tear drops can be bought over the counter at a chemist (less expensive than with a prescription). Your doctor will advise on how often to use the drops, but often the dosage can gradually be decreased once you work out how much is needed to keep your eyes comfortable. If you use the drops frequently, it is best to opt for a preservative-free brand as it won't contain benzalkonium hexachloride (a preservative that may cause damage with long-term usage).
- **Eye ointment.** Your doctor may also prescribe a soothing and lubricating ointment for use at bedtime.
- **Other treatments** include medicines to boost production of tears, or surgery to block the tears from draining away.

Simple lifestyle changes can help

- Drink plenty of water each day to keep the body hydrated and to flush away impurities.
- Make a conscious effort to blink frequently; especially when reading, watching TV or using a computer.
- Avoid rubbing your eyes. This will only worsen the irritation.
- If you wear contact lenses, check with your eye specialist if it is okay to continue wearing them while using the drops and/or ointment.

Contacting us

If you have a minor eye problem, please seek advice from your GP, optician or pharmacist. If urgent, please attend Eye Casualty or call 111.

Eye Casualty (Reading):	Mon-Fri 9am to 5pm; Sat & Sun & bank holidays 9am-12.30pm; Closed Christmas Day and New Year's Day.
Eye Casualty: Prince Charles Eye Unit (Windsor):	Mon-Fri 9am to 5pm; Sat 9am-12.30pm; Closed Sun & bank holidays.
Dorrell Ward (Reading):	0118 322 7172 (24 hours a day)
Eye Day Unit (Reading):	0118 322 7123 (Mon-Fri 7am to 6pm)

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Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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