

Plaza Del Rio Eye Clinic, P.C.

Dry Eyes

Dry Eye Syndrome

Overview

If you have dry eye syndrome, your eyes do not produce enough tears or you are unable to maintain a normal layer of tears to coat your eyes. As a result, your eyes cannot eliminate dust and other irritants, which can lead to stinging, burning, pain, and/or redness in your eyes. See your doctor right away if you have dry eyes and have a sudden increase in discomfort or redness or a sudden decrease in your ability to see.

Reading extensively, working on the computer, or spending long hours in a dry environment may further aggravate your eyes if you have this condition. If you have dry eye syndrome, your eyes may also be prone to bacterial infections or the surface of your eyes may become inflamed, causing scarring on your cornea. Although uncomfortable, dry eye syndrome only rarely causes permanent vision loss.

What Are the Causes of Dry Eye Syndrome?

Tears have three layers: the outer oily layer, the middle watery layer, and the inner mucus layer. If the glands that produce the various elements of your tears are inflamed or do not produce enough water, oil, or mucus, it can lead to dry eye syndrome. When oil is missing from your tears, they quickly evaporate and your eyes cannot maintain a steady supply of moisture.

Causes of dry eye syndrome include:

- dry arid climate
- wind or fans
- allergies
- LASIK or cataract surgery
- some medications, including antihistamines, nasal decongestants, birth control pills, and anti-depressants
- aging
- long-term contact lens wear
- staring at computers for long hours or not blinking enough
- postmenopausal and hormone replacement therapy

Who Is at Risk for Dry Eye Syndrome?

Dry eye syndrome is more common in people age 50 and older. Of the 5 million Americans in this age group with the condition, the majority are women, though the condition does occur in men. Women who are pregnant, on hormone replacement therapy, or going through menopause are more at risk. The following underlying conditions can also increase your risk:

- chronic allergies
- thyroid disease or other conditions that push the eyes forward
- immune system disorders such as lupus or rheumatoid arthritis
- sleeping with your eyes partially open (exposure keratitis)
- vitamin A deficiency (though if you get sufficient nutrition, this is unlikely)

What Are the Symptoms of Dry Eye Syndrome?

The most common symptoms of dry eye syndrome are burning, pain, and redness in the eyes. You may find that your eyes get tired faster than they used to or that you have difficulty reading or sitting at the computer for long periods. The feeling of having sand in your eyes is common, as is blurry vision.

How Is Dry Eye Syndrome Diagnosed?

If your eyes feel dry and you suddenly find yourself unable to see as well as you used to, visit an ophthalmologist right away. After describing your symptoms, you will likely undergo tests that examine the amount of tears in your eyes, such as a slit lamp (biomicroscope) exam of your tears. For this test, your doctor will use a dye such as fluorescein to make the tear film on your eyes more visible.

A Schirmer's test may also be used to measure how quickly your eyes produce tears. The test tests your rate of tear production using a paper wick placed on the edge of your eyelid. Your eye doctor also might refer you to a specialist, depending on the underlying cause of your condition (e.g. an allergist if you suffer from chronic allergies).

How Is Dry Eye Syndrome Treated?

Artificial Tears

Eye drops that increase your eye moisture are among the most common treatments for dry eye syndrome. Artificial tears work well for most patients.

Lacrimal Plugs

Your eye doctor might also use plugs to block the drainage holes in the corners of your eyes. This is a relatively painless, reversible procedure that slows tear loss. If your condition is severe, the plugs may be recommended as a permanent solution.

Medication

The medication most commonly prescribed for dry eye syndrome is an anti-inflammatory called cyclosporine (brand name Restasis). It increases the amount of tears in your eyes and lowers the risk of damage to your cornea. If your case of dry eye is severe, you may need to use corticosteroid eye drops for a short time while the medication takes effect.

If your dry eye is caused by another medication, your doctor may switch your prescription to try to find one that does not dry out your eyes.

Nutrition

A well-balanced diet with sufficient protein and vitamins is essential for eye health. Omega-3 essential fatty acid or flax seed oil supplements are recommended to enhance the oil content of the eye. These

supplements must usually be taken regularly for a period of at least three months to see an improvement.

Surgery

If your severe dry eye syndrome does not go away with other treatments, your doctor may recommend surgery. The drainage holes at the inner corners of your eyes may be permanently plugged to allow your eyes to maintain an adequate amount of tears.

Home Care

If your eyes are prone dryness, avoid use of ceiling fans especially in the bedroom, use a humidifier to increase moisture in the room, and avoid especially dry climates. Limit your contact lens wear, and limit time spent in front of the computer or television.

Long-Term Outlook

Dry eye syndrome usually does not permanently affect your vision. With treatment, you can considerably decrease your discomfort. In rare cases, eye infections and ulcers can occur and will need to be treated separately.