

# Allergic & dry eye

## Common eye problems

Sore, irritated, inflamed or red eyes can have different causes. Allergies can lead to red, watering, itching eyes in some people. In others, problems with tear production or tears that evaporate too quickly cause grittiness and irritation known as 'dry eye'. Allergic eye (allergic conjunctivitis) and dry eye are two common eye problems, and are explained in this leaflet. It is important to let your doctor check the exact cause of your eye problem as the correct treatments vary considerably.

### Conjunctivitis

Conjunctivitis is an inflammation of the conjunctiva – the wet surfaces of the white of the eye and the inner eyelids. Allergic conjunctivitis affects people of all ages, and itching is a classic symptom. Other symptoms are enlarged blood vessels, watering eyes and swelling. People with allergic conjunctivitis may also have a stuffy nose and other allergic symptoms.

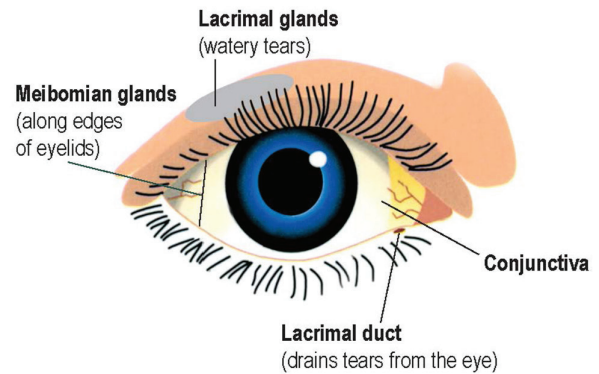
Allergic eye problems can be caused by airborne allergens, such as pollen (hayfever), or direct eye contact with allergic triggers such as cosmetics or preservatives (even some in eye drops). Allergy symptoms may be seasonal (eg, due to pollen, grass), perennial (year-round, with allergens such as dust mite or pets) or sporadic (eg, on direct contact).

Treatment of allergic eye may require lubricant eye drops (to provide comfort and to flush any allergens out of the eye), anti-allergy drops or antihistamine tablets to reduce the allergic response. It is also important to identify and avoid allergic triggers, if possible.

Bacterial or viral infection can also cause conjunctivitis. Bacterial conjunctivitis typically causes a thick yellow discharge, whereas in allergic or viral conjunctivitis the discharge is usually thin and watery, or a whitish colour. If the cause is bacterial, your doctor may prescribe antibiotic drops to clear the infection. Viral conjunctivitis often occurs in association with other symptoms of a viral illness, such as sore throat, fever, symptoms of a cold. It typically causes a red eye with watery discharge and a burning or gritty feeling. It often occurs in both eyes. Symptoms usually resolve by themselves.

Both viral and bacterial conjunctivitis are highly contagious, so it is important to use general hygiene measures to avoid spreading it (eg, hand washing and not sharing towels).

## Dry eye



Normally, tears form a protective film over the surface of the eye, lubricating movement and washing away debris and any toxins. Dry eye is caused by too little tear production or poor quality tears that form an inadequate film. Symptoms may include having dry, red, irritated eyes or trouble wearing contact lenses. Often a 'gritty, sandy' sensation is felt in the eyes. Eyes may also water excessively in response to irritation from the dryness. Dry eye may redden the eyes, but it requires different treatment from allergic conjunctivitis and 'red eye' (viral or bacterial conjunctivitis). For this reason, people with dry eye should not use drops available directly from the pharmacy without advice from a health professional. Some 'red eye' or 'allergic eye' drops can make dry eyes worse after a while, and drops containing preservatives can also create problems if you are sensitive to the preservative or using drops more than three times a day.

### Common causes of dry eye

- age – it affects 75% of people over 65 years of age
- being female – hormonal changes (eg, pregnancy, menopause, oral contraceptive)
- eyelid (meibomian) gland inflammation – you may have red eyelid margins and scaly eyelashes (blepharitis)
- medications – eg, decongestants, antihistamines, oral contraceptives, antidepressants, isotretinoin for acne, blood pressure tablets and 'red eye' drops
- diseases – eg, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, asthma, thyroid disease, other immune diseases
- computer use – users tend to blink less
- wearing contact lenses



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Dramatisation for illustrative purposes

It is important to have the cause of your dry eye properly identified. Your doctor will consider your general health, medications, environmental factors and examination findings to determine contributing factors and appropriate treatment. The first line of treatment is the appropriate formulation of ‘artificial tears’. Formulations are available as drops, ointment or eye spray. Persistent or troublesome symptoms not responding to artificial tears and/or treatment for blepharitis may require referral to an ophthalmologist.

### How to apply drops, ointment and eye spray

#### To apply drops:

- always wash your hands first
- open the container, and pull the lower eyelid gently down with your forefinger to form a pocket
- tilt your head slightly back and look up; and
- holding the bottle between the thumb and forefinger, gently squeeze the recommended number of drops in the lower eyelid pocket

#### To apply ointment:

- hold the tube between the thumb and forefinger
- rest your hand against your nose to position the tip of the ointment tube
- apply a small strip of ointment into the lower eyelid pocket

Do not touch the eye with the dropper or tube tip.

#### To apply eye spray:

When using for the first time push down on the nozzle three or four times to start the spray mechanism.

- Hold the spray 10cm from your CLOSED eyelid
- Spray 1–2 times onto your closed eyelid
- Use 3 or 4 times a day

You should discard eye spray 6 months after opening and all drops and ointments one month after opening to avoid bacterial contamination. Single dose lubricant eye drops remain sterile until opened, if used before the expiry date.

### Tear gland inflammation and scaly eyelashes

Often, oily tear (meibomian) glands in the eyelids become blocked, stagnant, inflamed and produce irritant secretions that worsen dry eye symptoms. Overgrowth of bacteria can also contribute to the inflammation. These problems can be improved with warm compresses, eyelid hygiene and occasionally special antibiotics. Including omega-3 in your diet may help in the long term due to their anti-inflammatory properties and by improving the quality of the oil secretions.

- Carefully warm the eyelids for two minutes using a wheat bag or in the shower.
- Then, use the tips of your clean fingers to massage the eyelids, pressing the skin towards the edge of the eyelid, along the upper and lower lids. This will squeeze the secretions out of the glands. The secretions aren't visible.

Scaly eyelashes (blepharitis) sometimes occur as well. If the scales fall into the eye, they causes grittiness and irritation. To help with this – after the massage – use a moist cotton pad to gently rub away scales from the base of the eyelashes.

These problems develop over years, so controlling them may mean months of this routine, but they will improve.

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