

# Dry Eye Syndrome

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## Overview

Your eyes produce tears continuously. Every time you blink, a layer of tears, known as the “**tear film**,” spreads over the front of your eyes to keep them moist and clean and your vision clear. Dry Eye syndrome occurs when the tear glands in your eyes do not produce enough of these lubricating tears or when the fluid simply evaporates. There are several treatments, ranging from eye drops to minor office procedure, which we can provide to help make your eyes more comfortable.

## Symptoms

- Irritated, and possibly, red eyes
- A sensation of sandiness, grittiness
- Burning or stinging
- Tired eyes
- A feeling that something is in your eye
- Decreased or fluctuating vision if your Dry Eye syndrome is severe
- One common symptom is watering of the eyes (especially in windy situations), which occurs when the irritation from the underlying dryness causes a gush of tears from the main tear-producing gland. This does not relieve the dryness because the eyes water with reflex tears, not lubricating tears.

## Screening and Diagnosis

If your symptoms improve when you use artificial tears or lubricating eye drops, Dry Eye syndrome is the most likely diagnosis. We will confirm the diagnosis during an eye exam, when we check the quality of your tear film and evaluate the amount of tears your eyes produce.

## Causes and Risk Factors

- Normal aging process
- Imbalance in the various gland secretions that make up your lubricating tears
- Decrease in the fluid production causing breaks in the tear film
- Allergies
- Certain medicines and injuries

- Medical conditions including thyroid disease, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and Sjögren's syndrome
- Certain eyelid or skin conditions such as [Blepharitis/Meibomitis](#) and Rosacea can make Dry Eye symptoms worse.
- Laser vision correction or contact lenses may make symptoms worse
- Environmental conditions, such as wind, smoke, dust, low humidity or dry weather may make symptoms worse

## Treatment

We will examine your eyes and medical history to see if there is an underlying cause or medical condition that may be causing Dry Eye syndrome. Treatment of the underlying cause may improve or resolve the symptoms.

### ***Artificial tears and lubricating drops***

Using artificial tears or lubricating eye drops is the primary treatment to alleviate your dry eye symptoms. These items are available over-the-counter in pharmacies. There are dosage recommendations; those without preservatives may be used as often as needed.

- Artificial tears are designed to act like our own tears.
- We recommend preservative-free eye drops for patients using the drops more than every 2 hours or for patients who may be sensitive or allergic to preservatives. These drops usually come in an individual dispenser instead of a bottle.
- For eye drops, tilt your head back and pull your lower eyelid down with one finger. Drop the medicine inside your lower lid. Be sure that the dropper or bottle tip is clean and does not touch the eye, eyelid, lashes, or any surface.
- Brands of drops and gels that improve tear volume or reduce evaporation are: Blink, Hypotears, Refresh, Refresh Plus, Refresh Liquigel, Soothe, Systane, Tears Naturale, Theratears. Some patients may benefit from Restasis, which requires a prescription.
- Some patients find better relief with gel type drops (these may initially blur the vision a little bit immediately after use). Many of the above brands generally offer a gel formulation.
- Selecting a brand of artificial tears can be like selecting a brand of body lotion – you may need to experiment to find the one that works best for you.

### ***Ointments***

- If you experience dryness during the middle of the night, you may benefit from using an ointment at bedtime. (Ointments should not be used during the day because they can blur your vision.)
- To apply ointment, pull down on your lower lid with one finger and squirt a small amount along the inside of the lid. Close your eye for 30 to 60 seconds to let the ointment or drops move around. As with eye drops, be sure that the tube or bottle tip is clean and does not touch your eye, eyelid, lashes, or any surface
- Brands of ointments: Lacrilube, Paralube, Refresh PM.

## **Surgery – Punctual Occlusion**

In severe cases of Dry Eye syndrome we may recommend an outpatient procedure called “punctual occlusion.” During this procedure a small plug is inserted in the **puncta**, a small opening in the eyelid where tears normally drain out of the eye into the back of the nose. Plugging these openings keeps the tears in the eye and prevents them from flowing away into the tear drainage system. These plugs are usually temporary and can be removed easily. This treatment is meant to augment the use of artificial tears rather than be a substitute for them.

## **Living with Dry Eye Syndrome**

Understand that this condition is chronic and that you may occasionally have flare-ups when your eyes feel dry. Following these suggestions will help you make your eyes more comfortable:

- Take frequent breaks when you read, watch television, or use a computer. Close your eyes. Do not rub your eyes. Artificial tears may help you when you do these activities.
- Use wrap-around sunglasses to protect your eyes from the sun, wind, and grit.
- Use a humidifier to increase the moisture in the air.
- Avoid smoke, wind, hair dryers, air conditioners, and aerosol sprays.
- If you wear contact lenses, use rewetting drops or wear your glasses until your eyes feel better.
- Use over-the-counter artificial tears at least four times per day.
- If you need drops more than every 2 hours, use preservative-free artificial tears.
- Use a lubricating ointment or gel at bedtime. Gels are thicker and last longer than drops. If you use an ointment at bedtime, you may experience less burning, dryness, and itching when you wake up in the morning. However, be aware that ointments may blur your vision.
- Drink adequate amounts of water to avoid dehydration
- Some specialists recommend flaxseed oil supplements, which can be purchased over the counter at most drug stores.

## **Possible Complications**

Long-term complications are rare if you follow the above recommendations. Though uncommon, patients with severe Dry Eye syndrome may develop eye inflammation, infection and scarring on the surface of your cornea. Please contact us immediately if you develop severe eye pain despite the recommended treatments.

## **Getting your care at Kaiser Permanente**

You can make an appointment with an ophthalmologist by calling our call center (415) 833-2200. The call center can also put you through to an advice nurse if you need immediate advice about your eyes. Our advice nurses are available 24/7. You can also email your doctor through our web site [www.kp.org](http://www.kp.org). Once you have registered for a user ID, you can access your prescription information, look at your lab results, view summaries from previous doctor's visits as well as send a message to your physician.