SYMPTOM

Dry eyes

Dry eyes are a gritty, burning, or uncomfortable feeling linked to inadequate or unstable tears.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Gritty, burning, scratchy, or tired eyes

WHERE IT IS FELT
One or both eyes

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Long screen use, dry air, reduced tear quality

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden vision change, severe pain, or chemical eye exposure

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to months, based on the cause and treatment

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Symptoms lasting several weeks or recurring despite self-care

Overview

Dry eyes can feel gritty, burning, sore, or unusually tired. Your eyes may also water because irritation can trigger reflex tears even when the normal tear layer is not working well.

Healthy tears contain water, oil, mucus, and protective substances that form the tear film. Dryness can develop when you make too few tears, tears evaporate too quickly, or this film becomes unstable.

Dry eyes may be temporary, such as after prolonged screen use or time in a windy place. They can also persist or keep returning, often because of several contributing factors.

What it may feel or look like

Dryness can affect one or both eyes. Symptoms may worsen with reading, driving, screen use, heating, or air conditioning.

You may notice:

Severe pain, marked redness, or a sudden lasting change in vision is not typical mild dryness

and needs prompt assessment.

- Gritty, sandy, burning, or stinging eyes
- Redness or a feeling that something is in the eye
- Watery eyes or stringy mucus
- Tired or uncomfortable eyelids
- Briefly blurred vision that improves after blinking
- Sensitivity to light
- Contact lenses becoming uncomfortable

Common causes

People tend to blink less during prolonged screen use or close work, allowing tears to evaporate. Wind, smoke, low humidity, air conditioning, and indoor heating can have a similar effect.

Oil from glands along the eyelid edges slows evaporation. If these glands become blocked or inflamed, you may have dryness, crusting, irritation, or tender eyelid edges.

Tear production can decrease with age. Hormonal changes and medicines such as some allergy medicines, antidepressants like sertraline or fluoxetine , acne treatments, water tablets like furosemide or hydrochlorothiazide , and blood pressure medicines may contribute. Do not stop prescribed medicine without speaking with the prescriber.

Less common causes include incomplete blinking, previous eye surgery, nerve damage, vitamin A deficiency, and autoimmune conditions such as Sjögren syndrome. Sjögren syndrome may also cause persistent dry mouth, fatigue, or joint symptoms.

Contact lenses can worsen dryness, but pain or redness in a lens wearer can also indicate infection or injury and should not automatically be blamed on dry eyes.

When to seek medical care

Book an appointment with an optometrist, ophthalmologist, or doctor if symptoms last several weeks, keep returning, or interfere with daily activities or contact lens use. Arrange follow-up sooner if self-care is not helping or you have persistent dry mouth, joint symptoms, eyelid swelling, or discharge.

Seek same-day medical care for:

Sudden major vision loss, a penetrating eye injury, or chemical exposure is an emergency. After chemical exposure, immediately rinse the eye with plenty of clean, lukewarm water and seek emergency help. Do not delay rinsing while arranging care.

- Significant eye pain, marked redness, or strong light sensitivity
- A new vision change that does not clear with blinking
- A painful or red eye while wearing contact lenses
- Symptoms after an eye injury or something becoming stuck
- Worsening symptoms after recent eye surgery

How the cause is found

A clinician may ask when symptoms began, what affects them, and whether you use contact lenses. They may review your medicines, environment, screen habits, eye surgery history, and other symptoms.

An examination can check your vision, eyelids, blinking, tear film, and the clear front surface of the eye. A slit lamp provides a magnified view.

A harmless dye may show dry or damaged areas and reveal how quickly the tear film breaks apart. Sometimes a paper strip test measures tear production. Results are considered alongside your symptoms and medical history.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on whether tears evaporate too quickly, production is reduced, the eyelids are inflamed, or another condition is involved.

Simple measures include:

Lubricating eye drops, or artificial tears, can provide temporary relief. Preservative-free products may be more comfortable if drops are needed frequently or preservatives cause irritation. Thicker gels and ointments last longer but can blur vision.

Redness-removing drops are not the same as lubricating drops. Ask a pharmacist or eye-care professional if you are unsure which product to use.

Persistent symptoms may need prescription treatment, management of eyelid inflammation, or small plugs that slow tear drainage. Contributing conditions or medicines may also need review.

- Take regular screen breaks and blink fully
- Move fans or air vents away from your face
- Consider a humidifier in dry rooms
- Wear wraparound glasses outdoors in wind
- Use a warm compress and gently clean the eyelid edges if advised
- Take a break from contact lenses when your eyes feel irritated

What to expect

Dryness caused by screens, wind, smoke, or low humidity may settle within hours or days after reducing the trigger. Symptoms caused by eyelid gland problems, reduced tear production, medicines, or long-term conditions may fluctuate for months or longer.

Treatment often focuses on control rather than an immediate cure. Arrange follow-up if symptoms continue despite self-care, become more frequent, or change in character.

Common questions

Why are my eyes watering if they are dry?

Irritation can trigger watery tears that spill over the eyelid but lack the balanced oil and mucus needed for a stable tear film.

Can screen use permanently damage my eyes?

Screen use commonly causes temporary dryness and eye strain because you blink less. Persistent symptoms deserve assessment, especially if they affect vision or daily activities.

Can I wear contact lenses?

Do not wear lenses when your eyes are painful, very red, or unusually sensitive to light. Remove them and seek same-day advice. For milder recurring dryness, an eye-care professional can review lens fit, materials, and wearing habits.

Is blurred vision normal with dry eyes?

Dryness can cause mild, fluctuating blur that improves after blinking. Sudden, severe, or lasting vision changes need urgent assessment.

Sources

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