SYMPTOM

Watery eyes

Watery eyes occur when excess tears collect in or spill from one or both eyes.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Tears spilling over or making vision briefly blurry

WHERE IT IS FELT
One or both eyes and nearby eyelids

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Dry eye, allergies, wind or smoke irritation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Eye pain, light sensitivity, or any change in vision

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes with irritation; longer with dryness or drainage problems

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent watering, repeated episodes, discharge, or an eyelid lump

Overview

Watery eyes happen when your eyes make more tears than usual or when tears do not drain properly. The medical term is epiphora .

Tears protect the eye, wash away particles, and keep its surface smooth. They normally drain through tiny openings near the inner corners of the eyelids and then into the nose. Watering can develop if the eye is irritated, the tear drainage system is blocked, or the eyelids are not directing tears into the drainage openings.

One or both eyes may be affected. Watering is often temporary, but persistent or one-sided symptoms may need an eye examination.

What it may feel or look like

Tears may pool along the lower eyelid or run down your cheek. Your vision might become briefly blurry but clear after blinking or wiping away the tears.

Other symptoms can help point toward the cause:

Pain, strong sensitivity to light, or vision that stays blurred is not typical of simple watering and

needs prompt assessment.

- Itching and sneezing often occur with allergies
- Burning or a gritty feeling can occur with dry eye
- Redness and discharge may occur with an eye infection
- Eyelid swelling or tenderness can occur with an inflamed eyelid gland
- Watering outdoors may be triggered by wind, cold air, or bright light

Common causes

Dry eye is a frequent reason for watering. This may seem surprising, but an irritated or poorly lubricated eye can respond by producing a rush of watery tears. These tears may not contain enough of the oils needed to remain on the eye's surface.

Allergies can make both eyes watery, red, and itchy. Pollen, animals, mould, and dust mites are possible triggers. Nasal congestion or sneezing may occur at the same time.

Temporary irritation from smoke, wind, cold air, fumes, dust, or something in the eye can trigger extra tears. Long periods of screen use may contribute by reducing how often you blink.

Eye infections , including conjunctivitis, can cause watering. Conjunctivitis means inflammation of the thin tissue covering the white of the eye. Viral infections often cause watery discharge, while bacterial infections may cause thicker discharge. Allergies can also cause conjunctivitis without an infection.

Less common causes include:

Rarely, watering accompanies a condition that could threaten sight, such as a serious corneal infection or a sudden rise in eye pressure. These usually cause other symptoms, especially pain, marked redness, light sensitivity, or reduced vision.

- A narrowed or blocked tear drainage channel
- An eyelid that turns inward or outward
- Eyelid inflammation, called blepharitis
- An eyelash rubbing against the eye
- A lump or swelling near a tear drainage opening
- Problems with the clear front surface of the eye, called the cornea

When to seek medical care

Arrange a routine appointment with an optometrist, ophthalmologist, or primary care clinician if watering lasts, keeps returning, or interferes with daily activities. You should also book an assessment if it mainly affects one eye, or if you have ongoing discharge, eyelid changes, or swelling near the inner corner of the eye.

Seek same-day medical care for:

Go to an emergency service for sudden loss of vision, severe eye pain with headache or nausea, or an object that has pierced the eye. Do not press the eye or try to remove an embedded object.

A chemical splash also needs immediate action. Rinse the eye continuously with plenty of clean, lukewarm water and arrange emergency help. Remove contact lenses if they come out easily, but do not delay rinsing.

- Eye pain, strong light sensitivity, or a change in vision
- A red, watery eye while wearing contact lenses
- Marked redness, swelling, or difficulty opening the eye
- A suspected scratch or something that remains stuck in the eye
- Watering after an eye injury

How the cause is found

The clinician will ask when the watering started, whether it affects one or both eyes, and what makes it better or worse. Mention itching, pain, discharge, injury, contact lens use, previous eye surgery, and any medicines or eye drops you use.

The examination may include checking your vision, eyelids, tear openings, and the surface of the eye. A microscope with a bright light, called a slit lamp, may be used. A harmless dye can help reveal dry areas or scratches.

If a drainage problem is suspected, an eye specialist may check whether fluid can pass through the tear channels. Further tests are not usually needed unless the examination suggests a deeper blockage or another eye condition.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on why your eye is watering.

For mild irritation, move away from smoke, fumes, or strong wind. Do not rub the eye, as this can worsen irritation. If a loose particle may be present, gently rinse with clean water. Do not attempt to remove anything embedded in the eye.

Lubricating eye drops, sometimes called artificial tears, may help when dryness is causing reflex watering. A pharmacist or eye care professional can help you choose a suitable product, especially if you wear contact lenses or need drops often.

For allergy symptoms, avoiding the trigger when possible and placing a cool compress over closed eyes may help. Anti-allergy eye drops may be useful, but persistent symptoms should be assessed rather than treated repeatedly without advice.

Treatment for infection depends on its cause. Antibiotic drops do not treat viral or allergic conjunctivitis. Avoid sharing towels or eye cosmetics when infection is possible, and wash your hands after touching the eye area.

Blocked drainage or eyelid-position problems may need treatment from an ophthalmologist. Options depend on the location and cause of the problem and can include procedures to improve tear drainage.

What to expect

Watering caused by wind, smoke, or a loose particle often settles after the trigger is removed. Allergy-related watering may return during exposure to the allergen. Dry-eye symptoms can fluctuate and may require ongoing care.

An infection may take several days or longer to settle, depending on its cause. Drainage and eyelid problems often continue until the underlying issue is treated.

Seek reassessment if symptoms are worsening rather than improving, or if pain, light sensitivity, or changes in vision develop.

Common questions

Why are my eyes watering if they are dry?

Dryness can irritate the eye's surface. Your tear glands may respond by releasing many watery tears, but these may drain away quickly and fail to correct the underlying dryness.

Can screen use cause watery eyes?

It can contribute. People tend to blink less while using screens, which allows the eye's surface to dry. Taking regular visual breaks and blinking fully may help.

Should I wear contact lenses while my eye is watery?

Remove your lenses if the eye is red, painful, unusually sensitive to light, or producing discharge. A red or painful eye in a contact lens wearer needs same-day assessment because corneal infections can progress quickly.

Is watering in only one eye important?

It can result from a local irritant, eyelid problem, or blocked tear channel. Arrange an examination if one-sided watering persists or repeatedly returns.

Sources

- National Eye Institute: Dry Eye
- National Eye Institute: Pink Eye
- NHS: Watering Eyes
- American Academy of Ophthalmology: What Is Dry Eye?
- Merck Manual Consumer Version: Tearing