



Lifestyle / Mind and Body

Why Your Eyes Are Dry and Irritated (and How to Find Relief)

Constantly rubbing your eyes, but got plenty of sleep last night? It could be dry eyes. Here's what to do.

By Isadora Baum | Apr 16, 2018

Topics: [eyes](#), [women's health conditions](#)

What's Causing Your Dry Eyes



If your eyes start itching and tearing up, or if they get puffy and red, it could be a case of dry eye syndrome, which happens when there isn't enough lubrication in your eyes to maintain normal function. Dry eye syndrome can make it hard to see straight and focus—not to mention it's really, *really* uncomfortable.

There isn't just one cause of dry eyes. All sorts of things can create irritation, like "decreased tear production [or] excess evaporation of tears, low blink rate, clogged oil glands along the lid margins,

aging, systemic diseases, and medications all contributing to inadequate surface wetting of the eye," says [Christine Morra, O.D.](#), an optometrist in New York.

What do dry eyes feel like, exactly? You might notice stinging, irritation, and excess tearing, along with redness, mild itching, blurred vision, and heaviness of the eyelids, says Dr. Morra. And, "if left untreated, dry eye symptoms can continue to worsen or even lead to permanent vision loss," she says. Yikes.

The good news? You can ID the cause of your dry eyes and find relief with a few holistic remedies and/or regular doctor visits. (Since there's actually quite a bit [you can learn about your overall health by looking at your eyes](#), regular checkups are beneficial, anyway.)

Here, seven causes of dry eyes and a few ways to help your peepers feel better, stat.

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Cause: Environmental Conditions



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If you're living in a busy, urban environment, you might be more exposed to pollution and environmental factors that can irritate your eyes, says Dr. Morra. (And BTW, [pollution can also mess with your skin, fitness gains, and hair.](#)) What's more, "air conditioning units, heating units, and windy, smoky, or dry environments all increase tear evaporation," she says.

Solution: Fortunately, there are a few ways to prevent dry eyes caused by environmental triggers. Regular use of a humidifier can help. "I like to add lavender or lemon essential oil to my diffuser at work," says Dr. Morra. This can help increase moisture in the air (not to mention [help you de-stress](#)

a bit). And if you're out and about, you officially have an excuse to toss on a pair of cute shades. "Sunglasses that wrap around the face or have side shields can help block the wind," she says.

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Cause: Contact Lenses



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If you ditch your glasses in favor of contact lenses, you could be at higher risk for dry eyes. Lenses can cause significant dryness on your eye surface, because they both decrease the amount of oxygen getting to the eye, and also rely on the production of tears to stay hydrated all day long, says Dr. Morra.

"If tear production is decreased or tears evaporate quickly off of the eye, the **contact lens dries** out and causes increased symptoms of dryness," she explains. "This is especially apparent toward the end of the day when coupled with the use of digital devices."

Solution: "Reduce time spent wearing contacts, **never sleep or swim in contact lenses**, and try different types of lenses," says **Ming Wang M.D., Ph.D.**, from the **Wang Vision Institute**, Nashville. "You may want to switch to dailies vs. monthlies, or switch from a multipurpose cleaning solution to a hydrogen peroxide-based cleaning solution." Chat with your eye doctor about your dry eyes, and they should be able to steer you in the right direction.

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Cause: Diet



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Really. A bad diet doesn't just affect your waistline—it also lands on the list of dry eye causes. "Processed foods with high salt content and alcoholic beverages lead to dehydration and can significantly contribute to dryness in the eyes," says Dr. Morra. Ever had blurred vision to pair with your nasty hangover? Dehydration is to blame.

What's more, "a diet low in omega-3 fatty acids is also a risk factor since high-omega-3 foods **help to decrease inflammation** in the body (and the eye in particular)," says Dr. Morra. "You need a balance

between omega-3s and omega-6s because omega-3s decrease inflammation in the body, whereas too many omega-6s can contribute to inflammation."

Unfortunately, most people are lower in omega-3s than omega-6s. "Depending on what you're eating (especially if it is mainly junk food,) you can be deficient in omega-3s and have an excess of omega-6s, leading to increased inflammation not only in the eyes but in the rest of the body," she says.

Solution: Increase your intake of omega-3s in the form of salmon, walnuts, and flaxseed, or these other [omega-3s sources](#). "Also try to decrease alcohol consumption and the amount of highly processed, salty junk food like potato chips," says Dr. Morra. (Or at least stay hydrated while drinking by alternating water with your booze.)

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Cause: Hormones



Hormonal fluctuations—especially those associated with birth control pills and pregnancy—can decrease tear production, says Dr. Morra. "This is a major contributor of dry eye symptoms in young adult women," she says.

More bad news: As you age, your eye health might get progressively worse, too. Aging leads to a decline in tear production, which is why dry eye syndrome is more common in people over age 50, says Dr. Morra. "Menopausal women are especially susceptible **due to their hormonal fluctuations**, which greatly increase dry eye symptoms," she adds.

Solution: "See your doctor to discuss a multitude of treatments including artificial tears, omega-3 supplements, prescription eye drops, and more dry eye treatments," says [Sarah Y. Connolly, O.D.](#), from the [Wang Vision Institute](#). While lifestyle tweaks may help moisten your eyes, doctor visits are especially important as you age.

PHOTO: AREEYA_ANN

Cause: Blink Rate



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You probably don't even realize when you're blinking—but it turns out, blink rate is actually pretty important when it comes to eye health and dry eye causes. "Blinking helps to refresh the tears on the surface of your eyes," says Dr. Wang. "A normal blink rate is 18 to 20 times per minute. But when you're focusing on a near device, your blink rate drops to four blinks per minute."

When we don't blink enough, tears can evaporate on the surface of our eyes, causing micro dry spots. Ouch. "This accumulative effect over a few hours creates dry eye symptoms," explains Dr. Connolly.

Solution: "Take visual breaks when using digital devices: Every 20 minutes, look away and blink 20 times to ensure proper tear production," says Dr. Morra. "I tell my patients to do this all the time. It's one of the most simple and effective ways to prevent dry eye syndrome in the office." Not helping? You can also see a doctor for special computer vision glasses and use over-the-counter artificial tear drops, Dr. Wang adds. (Here's everything you need to know about [computer vision syndrome or digital eye strain](#).)

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Cause: Medications



"Antihistamines, decongestants, antidepressants, birth control pills, hormone replacement therapy during menopause, and medications for anxiety, attention deficit disorder, acne, and high blood pressure can ALL cause dry eyes, mainly because of their ability to decrease the amount of fluid in the body in one way or another," says Dr. Morra.

Solution: You can use warm compresses and lid scrubs (especially if you have lid margin disease or rosacea) to help the oily part of the tear film coat the surface of the eye and decrease inflammation

along the lid margins (the edge of your eyelids), says Dr. Morra. (FYI, lid margin disease is when the tear glands in your upper and lower eyelids are inflamed and produce excess oil.)

You can also try LipiFlow, a procedure that uses heat to open up the glands along the lid margin, she says. "Performing this procedure on patients twice a year can significantly reduce the inflammation along their lid margins associated," she says.

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Cause: Diabetes



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Dry eyes are a common symptom in people who are diabetic, says Dr. Wang. Here's why: "Diabetes can lead to impaired nerve function throughout the body, and in particular, the cornea," he says. "When corneal nerves are damaged, patients begin to lose sensation on the front surface of their eye and tend to have fewer tears on their ocular surface." (BTW, [do you know your diabetes risk?](#))

What's more, hyperglycemia (which is an excess of glucose, or sugar, in the bloodstream) can inhibit the body's inflammatory response and increase the number of bacteria on the eyelids, says Dr.

Wang. This can lead to blepharitis (inflammation along the eyelid margin) and can cause dry eyes, explains Dr. Morra.

Solution: See a doctor for relief. Treatments can include controlling diabetes, as well as prescription medications, artificial tears, and omega-3s, says Dr. Connolly.

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