

Tears of sadness, tears of joy? What if your eyes simply don't produce enough tears throughout each day? If that's true for you, you might have dry eye syndrome, a disorder affecting about 30 million people; many are women and most are over age 40.

Tears are something that most people take for granted. After all, how often do you remember that tears are working round the clock, lubricating your eyes and keeping them comfortable? Made up of salty water, fatty oils, mucus, and proteins, tears also wash away debris, help prevent infection, and aid clear vision.

If you have dry eyes, you might first notice that your eyes feel very fatigued after reading or watching television. Or, you might become very sensitive to light or have trouble wearing contacts. A lack of tears can cause burning, scratching, or stinging—a sensation that something is actually in the eye. And, ironically, your eyes might turn into “gushers” in response to eye irritation or emotion—a response called reflex tears.

A variety of factors may be associated with dry eyes. They include:

- Aging and hormonal changes
- A dry climate or too much sun
- Smoking
- Certain medications
- Damage to tear glands from inflammation or radiation
- A condition such as Sjogren's syndrome, diabetes, scleroderma, rheumatoid arthritis, or lupus
- Refractive eye surgery such as LASIK
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If you have dry eyes for a long time, tiny abrasions may wear away their surface.

In many cases, you can ease the discomfort of dry eyes with a few simple steps. Living in a dry climate? Try a humidifier. Exposed to large amounts of dust or smoke? Do you best to stay away from them? Blink often, and avoid rubbing your eyes. Rest your eyes often, especially when reading or watching television. Wear glasses on windy days and goggles while swimming.

In addition, over-the-counter artificial tears may bring you relief. I can review with you the pros and cons of drops and ointments. To get oil moving more easily from oil glands and to cleanse your eyes of any bacteria, try a hot compress and eyelid scrub/massage with baby shampoo.

How can you know whether a doctor's care is needed? If symptoms resulted from an eye injury or if they persist despite self-care, that's a sure sign to see your doctor. Also, be sure to call if you have eye pain or redness, blurry vision, or other symptoms along with dry eyes.

To confirm a diagnosis, your primary care doctor or ophthalmologist may need to use different dyes and look at your eyes with a special microscope called a slit lamp. Other tests can measure the amount of tears you produce or their salt content. Blood tests may rule out other diseases.

Your doctor might prescribe cyclosporine (Restasis). It's the only prescription medication for chronic dry eyes. Other treatment might include antibiotic drops or ointment or oral antibiotics, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDS) to reduce any inflammation, or corticosteroid drops. Other techniques include special contact lenses, shields to keep eyes completely closed during sleep, eyelid repair, or steps to improve the tear drainage system.

So you can see that there's no need to suffer in silence. For dry eyes, there are many solutions in sight.