

What Are Dry Eyes

Do your eyes ever sting, burn, or feel scratchy? To be comfortable, your eyes need to be bathed, or lubricated, with tears. Normally, there is always a film of tears on the surface of your eyes. But if your eyes don't produce enough tears, the surface gets irritated. This is known as dry eyes.

Not enough lubricating tears

When you cry, or get something in your eye, or have an infection, your eyes make **reflex tears**. Each time you blink, another kind of tears, called **lubricating tears**, spread over the surface of your eyes. These tears keep the eyes moist and comfortable. You aren't aware of these tears because they stay on the surface of your eyes.

Without lubricating tears, your eyes get dry. Then they burn or sting and feel scratchy. They may also water. But this doesn't relieve the dryness. That's because the eyes water with reflex tears, not lubricating tears.

What causes dry eyes?

- Aging
- Heaters and air conditioners
- Wind, smoke, or dry weather
- Allergies such as hay fever
- Medicines
- Eyelid problems, injuries to the eye, or diseases like rheumatoid arthritis

How lubricating tears flow

Lubricating tears flow from glands in your upper eyelid over the surface of your eye. From your eye, the tears drain into canals that lead to your nose.

Treating Dry Eyes

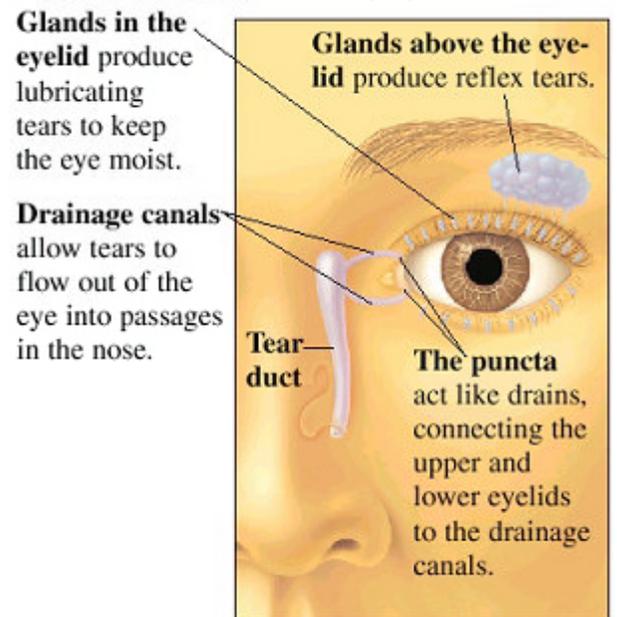
Artificial tears are the most common treatment for dry eyes. If they don't relieve your symptoms, your eye doctor may put in plugs. Or you may have surgery to stop the draining and increase the tear film.

Artificial tears

Artificial tears, or lubricating eye drops, replace your natural lubricating tears. You can buy most lubricating eye drops without a prescription. And you can use them as often as needed.

Lubricating eye drops are not the same as eye drops used to relieve redness or itching. Check with your eye doctor or pharmacist to be sure you buy the right drops.

Some lubricating eye drops have chemicals called preservatives. This makes them last longer. Your eyes may be sensitive to these drops. Or you may need to use them often. If so, you may want to buy lubricating eye drops made without preservatives. Your eye doctor may also suggest using a lubricating eye ointment at night.

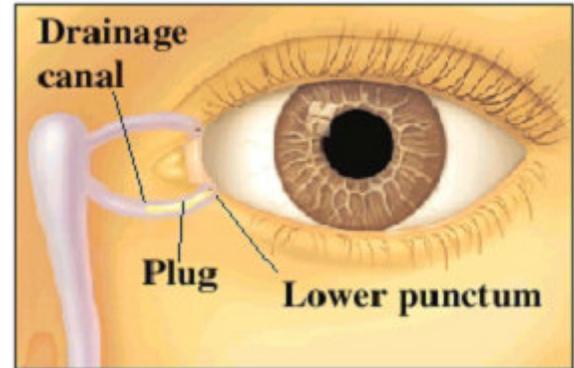


Medicine

Your doctor may prescribe medicine such as cyclosporine to treat your eye condition. It can help increase your eyes' ability to make tears.

Plugs

Closing the puncta with plugs can help keep the tear film on your eye. The plug acts like a stopper in a sink. It allows only a small amount of tears to drain out of your eye. Your eye doctor may first try short-term (temporary) plugs that dissolve in a few days. If these help, he or she may then put in long-term plugs. Your eyes will be numbed with drops when the plugs are inserted. You shouldn't feel any pain. And you shouldn't feel the plugs once they're in.



Surgery

If artificial tears or plugs don't relieve your dry eyes, surgery may be an option. Your eye doctor may do minor outpatient surgery to narrow or block the openings to the drainage canals. If your dry eyes are caused by eyelid problems, your eye doctor may recommend other kinds of surgery.