

Common eye problems

Our vision is one of our most valuable senses, so it is important to really take care of your eyes.

You should always see a doctor or an optometrist if you develop an eye condition that causes pain, vision loss or disturbance, or that comes on suddenly. Some eye conditions, such as a retinal detachment (symptoms include 'floaters' [cobwebs or specks in your vision], flashes of light, blurred or reduced peripheral vision) are considered medical emergencies and prompt treatment is usually necessary to save the eye. People who wear contact lenses are also prone to more severe eye problems and should always seek professional advice if they have any problems with their eyes.

Three of the most common eye conditions are painless red eye, dry eye syndrome, and eyelid inflammation.

Conjunctivitis

The surface of our eyeball and the inner surface of our eyelids is covered with a clear thin membrane called the conjunctiva. Conjunctivitis is a term used to describe inflammation of this membrane. It may also be called red eye or pink eye.

Conjunctivitis may be caused by allergies, bacteria, viruses, irritants, or environmental factors.

Allergic conjunctivitis

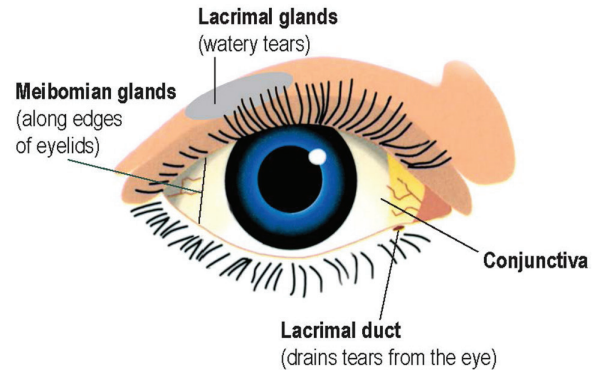
Allergic conjunctivitis tends to affect both eyes and symptoms include redness, itch, burning, swelling, and a watery, clear discharge. Other symptoms of allergy, such as a stuffy nose or sneezing may also be present.

Causes include pollen, grasses, animal fur, cosmetics or some preservatives used in eye drops. Allergy symptoms may be seasonal (eg. due to pollen, grass), perennial (year-round, with allergens such as dust mite or pets) or sporadic (eg. on direct contact).

Treatment of allergic conjunctivitis may require lubricant eye drops (to provide comfort and to flush any allergens out of the eye), anti-allergy eye drops or antihistamine tablets to reduce the allergic response. It is also important to identify and avoid allergic triggers, if possible.

Bacterial conjunctivitis

A discharge that causes the eyelids to be stuck together in the morning is a common symptom of bacterial conjunctivitis. Usually, only one eye is infected initially but the other quickly succumbs and the condition is very contagious so other family members or friends may also have symptoms. Treatment is usually with antibacterial eye drops prescribed



by a doctor or brought from a pharmacist. People with bacterial conjunctivitis should try not to touch their eyes and should avoid sharing towels, face cloths, or make-up with others to prevent spreading it to others because it is very contagious.

Viral conjunctivitis

Viral conjunctivitis usually accompanies a cold or other viral infection and symptoms often respond to general cold and flu remedies such as decongestants, although usually resolve by themselves. Symptoms typically include red, burning, and gritty eyes with a watery discharge and the condition is also very contagious.

Dry eye

Normally, tears form a protective film over the surface of the eye, lubricating the eye with every blink and washing away debris and toxins.

Dry eye occurs when the eye does not produce enough tears, or tears are of too poor a quality to properly lubricate the eye. Watery eyes are, surprisingly, a common symptom of dry eyes and this is because the tear film is no longer effective at lubricating the eye. Other symptoms include dry, red, gritty or irritated eyes or having trouble wearing contact lenses.

It is important to have the cause of your dry eye properly identified (see *Common causes of dry eye*, following page).

Lubricating eye products (also called artificial tears) are usually tried first; however, some contain preservatives that may further disrupt the tear film and preservative-free products are preferred. Formulations are available as drops, ointment or eye spray. Seek advice from a pharmacist or doctor about which one to use. Persistent symptoms may require referral to a specialist in eye conditions.



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Common causes of dry eye

- Age – it affects 75% of people over 65 years of age
- Computer use – users tend to blink less
- Hormonal fluctuations (eg, pregnancy, menopause, oral contraceptives)
- Eyelid (meibomian) gland inflammation – see below
- Medical conditions– eg, rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, asthma, thyroid disease, other immune diseases
- Medications – eg, decongestants, antihistamines, oral contraceptives, antidepressants, isotretinoin for acne, blood pressure tablets and ‘red eye’ drops
- Wearing contact lenses

Eyelid (meibomian) gland inflammation and scaly eyelashes (blepharitis)

Lining the edges of our eyelids are meibomian glands which secrete an oily substance that makes up tears. Sometimes these glands become blocked, stagnant, inflamed and infected with bacteria.

Any oil that does make it out of the glands can be abnormal and granular, and cause irritation.

One of the best treatments for meibomian gland dysfunction are warm, eyelid compresses that clear the build-up of dead skin, oil, and bacteria. Including Omega-3’s (such as fish oil or flaxseed oil) in your diet may also improve the quality of oil secretions and reduce inflammation. Occasionally antibiotics may be needed. Resolving this condition may take several months.

Scaly eyelashes (blepharitis) sometimes occur as well. Eye compresses also help with these. After the massage, use a moist cotton pad to gently rub away scales from the base of the eyelashes.

Eyelid compresses

- Use a warm (not hot) face cloth to apply heat to the eyelids for four minutes or more
- Then, use the tips of your clean fingers to massage the eyelids, through the face cloth, pressing the skin towards the edge of the eyelid, along the upper and lower lids. This will squeeze the secretions out of the glands. The secretions aren’t visible.

How to apply drops, ointment, and eye spray

To apply drops:

- Always wash your hands first
- Open the container, and pull the lower eyelid gently down with your forefinger to form a pocket
- Tilt your head slightly back and look up
- Holding the bottle between the thumb and forefinger, gently squeeze the recommended number of drops into the lower eyelid pocket

To apply ointment:

- Hold the tube between the thumb and forefinger
- Rest your hand against your nose to position the tip of the ointment tube
- Apply a small strip of ointment into the lower eyelid pocket

Do not touch the eye with the dropper or tube tip.

To apply eye spray:

When using for the first time push down on the nozzle three or four times to start the spray mechanism.

- Hold the spray 10cm from your CLOSED eyelid
- Spray 1–2 times onto your closed eyelid
- Use 3 or 4 times a day

You should discard eye spray 6 months after opening and all drops and ointments one month after opening to avoid bacterial contamination. Single dose lubricant eye drops remain sterile until opened, if used before the expiry date.

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