

Ophthalmology department

Dry eyes

Information for patients, relatives and carers

Introduction

This leaflet has been designed to give you information about dry eyes and answer some of the questions that you or those who care for you may have. It is not meant to replace the discussion between you and your medical team but aims to help you understand more about what is discussed. If you have any questions about the information below, please contact us.

What causes dry eyes?

Dry eyes can occur if your eyes don't produce enough tears, or your tears evaporate too quickly.

Glands in the eyelids secrete oil within the eyelids and around the eye. Tear film covers the surface of the eye and is made up of three layers.

These layers:

- keep the surface wet
- prevent cell damage
- discourage the growth of bacteria

Deficiency or an imbalance in any one of the three layers will lead to dry eyes.

Main causes include age-related changes, inflammation of the glands in the eyelid (blepharitis), dry, dusty working conditions and central heating.

In rare circumstances, dry eyes may be caused by an underlying condition that affects other parts of the body. If so, your ophthalmologist will treat you and if necessary, refer you to an appropriate specialist.

What are the signs and symptoms?

The eye often looks completely normal, but you may feel the following:

- itching
- gritty, scratchy or sensation of a 'foreign body' (something that should not be there)
- discomfort / burning / pain
- red eyes
- blurred vision (in more advanced cases)

Due to the tear layers being disrupted, dry eyes can also present as watery eyes because the tears evaporate quicker than usual.

Treatment

You will be given artificial teardrops to use during the day, and possibly some ointment to use last thing at night.

Different types of artificial teardrops can be bought over the counter at a chemist without a prescription. They are less expensive than a prescription charge and you can buy them whenever you need to.

You will be advised to use the drops on a regular basis and gradually reduce the frequency to just a few times a day as your eyes become more comfortable. In time, you will be able to judge how often you need to use artificial eye drops.

The drops are used to relieve the symptoms, but they will not cure the condition. You may always need to use the drops.

In more advanced cases, medicated eye drops may be required to treat the cause of dry eyes. These will be discussed and prescribed by your clinician.

Sometimes, for severely dry eyes, tiny silicone plugs can be inserted into the little tear drainage channels at the inner corner of each eye. These plugs help to preserve any tears for maximum effect and to keep the eye moist and healthy.

Who you can contact for more information

- Emergency department at Western Eye Hospital – 020 3312 3245
- Outpatients at Western Eye Hospital – 020 3312 3236
- Outpatients at Charing Cross Hospital – 020 3311 1109/ 1233/ 0137

How do I make a comment about my visit?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff will be happy to answer any of the questions you may have. If you have any suggestions or comments about your visit, please either speak to a member of staff or contact the patient advice and liaison service (PALS) on 020 3312 7777 (10.00 – 16.00, Monday to Friday). You can also email PALS at imperial.pals@nhs.net The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and is often able to help solve problems on your behalf.

Alternatively, you may wish to complain by contacting our complaints department:

Complaints department, fourth floor, Salton House, St Mary's Hospital, Praed Street
London W2 1NY

Email: ICHC-tr.Complaints@nhs.net

Telephone: 020 3312 1337 / 1349

Alternative formats

This leaflet can be provided on request in large print or easy read, as a sound recording, in Braille or in alternative languages. Please email the communications team: imperial.communications@nhs.net

Wi-fi

Wi-fi is available at our Trust. For more information visit our website: www.imperial.nhs.uk

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