

Women and Dry Eye

Dry eye syndrome is among the most common eye conditions in the United States. What is dry eye syndrome? In healthy eyes, a thin layer of tears coats the outside surface of the eye, keeping it moist and washing away bits of debris that might fall into the eyes. Dry eye syndrome occurs when the eye doesn't make enough tears, or doesn't make effective tears, or the tears that it does make evaporate too quickly and leave the eye dry and vulnerable.

People with dry eyes often experience dryness, stickiness, and stinging or burning of their eyes. The eyes are often red and irritated. Sometimes the eyes water excessively in an effort to soothe the irritation, but these reflex tears are usually not adequate to fix the problem, and all they do is spill over the eyelid and run down the cheek.

The cause of dry eye syndrome is unknown, but the disease becomes more common as we age, and is particularly common in women. Dry eye syndrome affects women two to three times more often than men. This is thought to be related to hormones. Male hormones (such as testosterone) seem to be good for the tear glands, and female hormones (particularly estrogen) seem to be bad for the tear glands. In a recent study, women who were on hormone replacement therapy after menopause were at higher risk for developing dry eyes. Compared to women not receiving hormone replacement therapy, women using estrogen alone were 70 percent more



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likely to develop dry eyes, and women on both estrogen and progesterone were 30 percent more likely to develop dry eyes. By one estimate, 1 in 20 women over the age of 50, and 1 in 10 over the age of 75, have dry eye syndrome. This amounts to over 3.2 million middle-aged or older women with dry eye syndrome in the U.S. alone.

One particular form of dry eye syndrome occurs in patients with Sjögren's syndrome. Patients with Sjögren's syndrome suffer from dry eyes and dry mouth, because their

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bodies mistakenly produce small molecules that attack their moisture-producing glands, in addition to causing other problems, such as rheumatoid arthritis or lupus. Ninety percent of people with Sjögren's syndrome are women.

Dry eye syndrome may sound like more of a nuisance than a serious problem. But if left untreated, severe cases of dry eye syndrome can result in permanent loss of sight. These include problems such as inflammation, infection, and scarring of the eye surface.

If you have dry eye syndrome, there are numerous treatments available to help protect your eyes and your sight. For many dry eye sufferers, small changes in their daily habits can make the problem better. For others, tear replacement drops, medications, and plugs to block tears from escaping once they reach the eye surface are all effective in reducing or eliminating dry eye symptoms. **Your doctor can help you develop a treatment plan that's right for you.**