



ask the doctor

DO YOU feel your eyes drying up?

Dry eye syndrome (DES) is a common eye condition that often goes undiagnosed. DES occurs when people either don't have enough tears or the correct composition of tears on the surface of the eyes to keep them lubricated.

Tear secretion is essential for the maintenance of eye health. The tear film is made up of an inner mucous layer, a middle water layer, and an outer oily layer. All three components are critical to a normal tear film. If any of the three layers is deficient, the person may suffer from DES.

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES?

Men and women of any age may develop DES. However, certain factors are known to trigger a higher risk of developing DES.

Advanced age is the single most important risk factor for DES. It affects 75% of the population over the age of 65 years.

Several diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, thyroid abnormalities, asthma, cataracts, glaucoma and lupus have DES as a side effect.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

If you have DES, your eyes can feel persistently gritty, itchy and painful. The sensations often worsen as the day extends. Stringy mucus may appear in or around the eyes. Paradoxically, some may experience excessively watery eyes.

Patients with the most severe disease are at increased risk of developing corneal infection, scarring or ulceration. These conditions can cause permanent vision loss.

WHAT'S THE TREATMENT?

Usually, the first line of treatment is eye drops that act as artificial tears. Cyclosporine A eye drops help decrease any inflammation on the surface of the eye.

In cases of persistent DES, permanent, reversible closure of the tear duct or punctal occlusion, may be the best solution.



TACKLING THE PROBLEM

To help alleviate your symptoms from DES, you may want to try these tips at home.

A humidifier puts more moisture in the air. With more moisture in the air, your tears evaporate more slowly, keeping your eyes more comfortable. Airconditioning decreases the humidity in the air and increases dryness.

Excessive air movement dries out eyes. Avoid having excessive air movement by decreasing the speed of ceiling fans and/or oscillating fans.

If you feel your eyes are dry while you are reading or watching television, take frequent breaks to allow your eyes to rest and become moist again.

If you are using contact lenses, consult your eye doctor regarding the safety.

Punctal occlusion allows you to retain your own, natural tears without the bother or expense of constantly replacing the tear film with artificial tears.



WHAT DOES THE DOCTOR SAY?

Tests for dry eyes can be performed through several methods. Schirmer's test is done by placing a small piece of filter paper inside the lower part of the eyelids.

The eyes are kept closed for a few minutes and the filter paper is taken out to measure the amount of tear production.

Fluorescein eye drops may

also be used to determine tear production. Tears may also be examined to see if they contain enough moisture, proteins, and other materials.

If autoimmune diseases are suspected as a cause, blood tests may be performed. These tests help detect different auto antibodies.