

Dry Eyes: A Guide to Treatment

Dry, irritated eyes are one of the most common complaints an ophthalmologist hears from patients. Paradoxically, many people don't think they have a dry eye because their eyes tear and run water. This overflow tearing is the body's attempt to soothe an underlying dry or uncomfortable eye. The ability to keep the eyes moist between blinks tends to diminish with age and can be made worse in dry climates, windy conditions and with hormonal changes associated with pregnancy and nursing.

Many people will find relief from adding additional moisture to their eyes with an artificial tear drop. These are non-medicated, over-the-counter drops that do not require a prescription. They can be used as often as every 30 minutes, to as seldom as once a day or only when needed. Most people will generally start at two to three times per day but the actual frequency may vary day-to-day depending on comfort and conditions. It is similar to how one might use lotion periodically to soothe dry skin. Some days more lotion is needed and some days no lotion may be needed. Same with the eyes and tears.

Also like lotion, artificial tear drops come in different forms. There is generally little difference between different brands but you should be aware that there are different consistencies of eye drops available and your choice will depend on how severe your symptoms are and how much blurred vision you can tolerate.

Artificial tear drops come in watery versions, oily or gel versions and even ointments with the consistency of Vaseline! (Never use Vaseline on your eyes though, it is not made to be go on the eye). The watery versions are often all that are needed when dry eye symptoms are mild or infrequent. More severe dry eyes may require oily or gel preparations for comfort. Severe dry eyes, especially due to problems with eye closure, may require using ointments on the eye overnight. As you might imagine, your vision will be more blurred if you are using an oily or gel drop and particularly blurred by using ointments. For this reason, people will commonly avoid the oily or gel versions and ointment during times when sharper vision is needed. In some cases however, severe dry eye will require the use of these thicker preparations for comfort and optimal ocular health.

The following is not meant to be a complete list of available products but is only a guide to your choices of supplemental eye moisture.

Watery drops (for mild symptoms or when sharp vision is needed)

- Blink for mild to moderate dry eye
- Genteal liquid drops
- Soothe
- Refresh Tears
- Systane
- Visine dry eye

Oily drops (for moderate to severe dry eye)

- Blink for moderate to severe dry eye
- Genteal gel drops
- Soothe XP
- Refresh liquigel
- Systane Ultra
- Visine long-lasting dry eye

Gel drops

- Genteal gel
- Refresh gel
- Systane liquigel

Ointments

- Genteal p.m.
- Refresh p.m.
- Lacrilube gel

You should stay away from “get the red out” drops. These have a medicine that constricts blood vessels. They are not meant to treat a dry eye problem and may even make it worse. Also, you will see “preservative-free”, single-use vial preparations among the tear drop bottles on the drug store shelf. In general, unless you have a known sensitivity to the preservatives used in bottled eye drops, the single-use vials are not necessary and are considerably more expensive than the already pricey bottled drop versions.

To summarize: if you have mild dry eye, a watery drop is probably all you’ll need. For more severe symptoms or for longer lasting comfort, you will want to get an oily or gel version in addition to the watery drop and use them as needed for your comfort and vision needs. For moderate to severe dry eyes, I’d also recommend an ointment to use overnight. Some patients, by using an ointment overnight, will greatly diminish, if not eliminate, their dependence on drops the next day. You may also want to pick up a bottle of eye rinse or eye stream to use to wash away any leftover ointment in the morning when you wake up.

Some patients will not find relief from artificial tears. These patients may benefit from Restasis, a prescription drop that stimulates your body to make more of its own natural tears. Restasis doesn’t work for everyone and has some side effects. Talk to your doctor if you’d like more information.

Dry eyes are uncomfortable and sometimes there is no long-lasting cure. The use of supplemental tear drops will often give soothing relief and improve the quality of your life.