

How Can My Eyes Be Dry if They're Always Watering?

BY DR. THOMAS P. FINLEY, OPTOMETRIST

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That's a question I'm constantly asked. However, once you understand what's occurring within the eyes and tear ducts, the answer makes perfect sense.

The eye is lubricated by tear glands in the upper and lower eyelid. These tears keep the eye moist and contain natural antibiotics to help fight infections. If the quantity and quality of your natural tear decreases, your eyes become dry.

Common signs and symptoms of dry eye can include redness, dryness, scratchiness, burning or stinging, a sensation something is in your eye, grittiness, fluctuating and blurring of vision, sensitivity to light, and just a tired feeling. Additional signs are excessive tearing or watering of the eyes.

When your eyes become dry, they also become inflamed and irritated. This causes the production of a reflex tear, produced from a different gland in the eye. This reflex tear lacks the oil of your normal tears and does not wet the eyes as well. So even though you have tears running down your cheeks, your eyes are still relatively dry and without a wetting tear.

This reflex tear is what is produced during an emotional cry. Since it does not wet your eyes well, your eyes become red and irritated to the point where it's so noticeable, that people think you've been crying.

What causes dry eye?

Most people's eyes become drier as they age. One report estimates 75 percent of people over the age of 65 will experience dry eye symptoms. People who do not blink completely or frequently enough (the average person blinks nearly 8000 times a day), as well as people who spend a lot of time on a computer tend to suffer from dry eyes. Extreme cold, heat, low humidity, and wind can cause your tears to evaporate quickly.

Dry eye is also common in arid places and in enclosed spaces with recycled air such as airplanes and office buildings. The defroster in your car may dry your eyes. Hormonal changes, autoimmune diseases such as Sjogren's Syndrome and Lupus, and certain types of medications, including antihistamines, oral contraceptives and antidepressants, can contribute to dry eye.

It's estimated that 10-20 percent of Americans have dry eye. While anyone can experience dry eye, it is about two to three times more prevalent in women than in men. It is also estimated that nearly six million women and three million men in the U.S. have moderate to severe symptoms of the condition, and scientists estimate that an additional 20-30 million people in this country have mild cases of dry eye.

How do I know if I have Dry Eyes?

A thorough comprehensive eye examination including evaluation of the tear film with a microscope helps determine if your eyes are dry. Unfortunately, this test is very subjective. A new objective test called Tear Lab, measures the

osmolarity of your tears and quantifies the health and stability of your tear film. Tear Lab is also a valuable tool in measuring treatment effectiveness.

What can be done if your eyes are dry?

There is no cure for dry eyes so it must be managed every day. The most common remedy is supplementing your normal tears with over the counter artificial tear drops. These drops moisten your eyes and turn off the spigot of reflex tears flooding your eyes. More viscous gels and ointments are also used. These remain in contact with the eyes longer, but tend to blur vision. Omega 3 fatty acid vitamin supplements (fish oil and flaxseed oil) have also been shown to help with dry eyes.

Frequent blinking every 5 seconds helps tear production and the even distribution of tears. Avoid sleeping with ceiling fans. Make certain your eyelashes are clean and free of debris. Hot compresses on your closed eyelids can help with tear production.

Other treatments include a procedure called punctal occlusion, which is a temporary closure of the tear duct so your tears will pool and remain on your eye for a longer time. A relatively new prescription eye drop called Restasis has been shown to increase the production of your eye's own tears. It's taken twice a day, everyday.

Dry eye is an extremely common and serious eye condition that can have a large negative impact on your daily activities. Make certain your eye doctor performs a thorough examination including tests for dry eyes.



Dr. Thomas P. Finley received his Bachelor of Science degree from St. Francis University in Pennsylvania, and his Doctorate of Optometry from the Pennsylvania College of Optometry. Following graduation, he served as an optometry officer in the United States Air Force and was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal and the Commendation Medal.

Dr. Finley has served as an adjunct clinical professor for three optometry schools, and has been a clinical investigator for two major contact lens companies. He has published several articles in professional and trade journals and local newspapers and has also lectured at educational conferences.

Dr. Finley is a Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry, a Fellow of the Virginia Academy of Optometry, and a member of the American Optometric Association, Virginia Optometric Association, and Northern Virginia Optometric Society. He is an Advisory Board member for TLC Laser Eye Centers.

Locally, Dr. Finley serves as an active member of the Herndon Rotary Club (past president), Chamber of Commerce (past board member), Optimist Club (youth sports' coach), and Knights of Columbus (past board member). He serves on the board of the Jeanie Schmidt Free Clinic. He was awarded Herndon's "Distinguished Service Award," the Chamber of Commerce's "Small Business of the Year Award," and The Times Newspapers "Best Eye Doctor Award." He has owned his Herndon optometry practice since 1989.

Dr. Finley was recently recognized by the Virginia Optometric Association as Distinguished Optometrist of the Year.



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