

Your Eyes Should Not Itch and Burn as You Age

Aging is unavoidable, and as you age, your body undergoes many important changes. Your eyes are no exception. One of the most common problems associated with aging eyes is dry eye syndrome. If your eyes frequently burn or feel itchy or scratchy, you may have dry eye syndrome.

As its name suggests, dry eye syndrome is caused by inadequate moisture to the eye. The front surface of the eye must be kept moist at all times in order to work properly. This is why your body produces tears—to keep the eye moist and healthy so that your vision will be crisp and clear. Tears have three main ingredients: a mucin layer that coats the outer surface of the eye, an aqueous or watery layer that provides moisture to the eye surface, and a lipid or oil layer on the outside to slow down evaporation so that your tears will last longer on your eye. Each of these three key ingredients is made by a different set of tear glands in your eyelid. If any of the three ingredients is missing, or if your tears evaporate too quickly, you will develop dry eye syndrome.

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and a sensation of grittiness like sand in your eyes. Your vision may be blurred. Often these symptoms worsen throughout the day, becoming worse in the late afternoon or evening. Although this sounds backwards, some dry eyes water excessively. This is because a dry eye is often irritated, and eye irritation often triggers tearing to help soothe the eye. If your eye becomes dry and irritated because your tears are defective, then making lots more defective tears is no solution: instead you just end up with irritated, wet eyes.

There are many causes of dry eyes, but the most common cause is simply getting older. As you age, your body produces less oil. This results in dry, irritated skin and also dry eyes. The eyes get dry because the oil layer of your tears is deficient, and the water in your tears evaporates too fast. Women are particularly vulnerable to dry eyes as they age, because the hormonal

changes that accompany aging often reduce tear production.

Dry eye syndrome can be treated in a variety of ways. Environmental and lifestyle changes may be all that is needed. Perhaps you sit too close to a heating or air conditioning duct that is drying out your eyes, or perhaps cigarette smoke is irritating your eyes. Tear replacement therapy can effectively moisten your eyes. Placing small plugs in your tear ducts can reduce tear drainage, making your tears last longer. And new prescription medications can help stimulate your tear glands to produce more of your natural tears.

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