

Dry Eye

Tears

Tears lubricate, clean and nourish the sensitive cornea, the window of the eye. They are essential for its health and comfort.

Tears are produced by the tear gland situated in the upper lid. Tears also contain oily substances made by other glands in the eyelid. These enable the tears to cling to the surface of the cornea. The front of the eye is constantly bathed by tears; they are spread over the surface by blinking.

Finally, they drain away into the nose and throat through small drainage glands situated on the inner lids, as shown in the diagram below.

What causes dry eye?

- When insufficient tears are made by the tear gland. This may happen as a person grows older, or it may sometimes be associated with other conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis.
- When there is a lack of some of the oily substances in the tears. This can cause an uneven covering of tears on the front of the eye. It may also allow tears to evaporate quickly, or to run straight off the eye.

Both of these situations can lead to dry patches forming on the cornea.

An otherwise healthy eye can become sore from drying of the cornea, a problem with blinking, or if the lids do not close properly during sleep.

What are the symptoms of dry eye?

- A sensation of sand/grit in the eye.

- Burning.
- Watering, i.e. when the tears lack the correct substances and flow too freely off the eye.

There may also be a slight redness and a little mucus may collect in the bottom lid. The eye is more likely to become infected.

How can the doctor tell if the problem is dry eye?

Apart from the symptoms and appearance of the eyes, there are very simple tests which will show whether or not enough tears are being made, or if they are not properly covering the cornea.

What is the treatment?

1. Replacement tears in the form of eye drops are put into the eyes four times a day, or even more often on occasions.
2. A lubricating ointment to put in at night. The condition of dry eye cannot be reversed so the treatment must not be stopped even if it does improve.

The drops and ointment must be used regularly. They will comfort the eyes and prevent damage to the cornea.

Dry and smokey atmospheres should be avoided. Room humidifiers, or a dish of water by the heater, can be helpful.

We hope you find this information useful. If you have any other questions, please do not hesitate to ask the nursing or medical staff.

The Trust cannot accept any responsibility for the accuracy of the information given if the leaflet is not used by RD&E staff undertaking procedures at the RD&E hospitals.

© Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust

Designed by Graphics (Print & Design), RD&E