

# Stay Well:

## My eyes are dry, scratchy and inflamed.

## How can I fix them?

The experts tell *Suzanne Harrington* the causes of this common condition, and what can be done to alleviate it

**Y**our eyes are scratchy, your contact lenses feel like sandpaper, your eyeballs are driving you mad — even if you don't wear contacts. Welcome to dry eye. Can anything be done?

“Dry eyes are a common and often uncomfortable condition”, says Mr. Ian Dooley, Consultant Ophthalmologist at the [Mater Private Network](#)

“Most of us have likely experienced that annoying sensation where it feels like an eyelash is stuck in our eye, only to find there's nothing there. That's dry eye. Unlike conditions like age-related macular degeneration (AMD), which affects the back of the eye, dry eye affects the surface and can be quite painful.

“The eyes themselves may appear a little pink, and the symptoms can often be worse in the morning or evening. One tell-tale sign is variability in vision throughout the day — your eyes just won't stay comfortable. And, in a twist, the most common cause of watery eyes is actu-

ally dryness.

“In my clinic, I see patients with dry eyes regularly, and when severe, it can really disrupt people's lives.”

### What exactly happens to your eyes if you have dry eye?

“Our tear film, which keeps our eyes protected, is made up of three layers,” explains Mr Dooley.

“The first is a mucus layer (Mucin), produced by the white part of the eye. Next is the watery layer, which comes from the lacrimal gland and is the source of our emotional and overflow tears. Finally, there's the oily layer, produced by the Meibomian glands in our eyelids. When everything works well, these layers combine to keep our eyes comfortably lubricated.

“Dry eye often occurs when the quality of this tear film is poor, and the tears evaporate too quickly.

“In some cases, lack of tear production is the main issue. Conditions like Sjogren's syndrome, which often occurs alongside rheumatoid ar-

thritus, can severely limit tear production. Other issues, like eyelids that don't close properly — as seen in Bell's palsy — or abnormal eyelashes, can also contribute to dry eye."

### What's the main cause of dry eye?

"In Ireland, the most common reason for poor tear quality is a condition called Blepharitis," says Mr Dooley.

"Here, the eyelids can be a little red or swollen, and sometimes you'll notice dandruff-like flakes on the lashes," says Mr Dooley.

"This leads to blockages in the Meibomian glands, reducing the oil produced and making the tear film unstable. With the protective oily layer breaking down quickly between blinks, the watery layer evaporates, drying out the eye. Ironically, the eye then over-produces tears as a reflex, leading to watering eyes — despite the dryness underneath."

### What else can cause dry eye?

Basically everything — pregnancy, menopause, getting older, the weather, screens, eye makeup, not blinking enough, and seemingly unrelated health conditions.

"Various factors can contribute to dry eye, including aging, hormonal fluctuations, certain medications, environmental conditions such as dry or windy weather, prolonged screen exposure, and underlying health issues like diabetes or rheumatoid arthritis," says Ms Nikolina Budimlija, Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon at the Institute of Eye Surgery and spokesperson for the Irish College of Ophthalmologists.

"Additionally, incomplete blinking during extended periods of focused activity can exacerbate dry eye symptoms.

"Certain cosmetics, particularly eye makeup, may also aggravate these symptoms, making it essential to select hypoallergenic and fragrance-free products to reduce irritation."

But wait, there's more, says Mr Ian Dooley: "Certain environmental factors can also make dry eyes worse. Moving air — whether from fans, air conditioning, or heating — increases tear evaporation.

"Daily activities like reading, working on a computer, or driving often trigger symptoms, and other contributors include smoking, alcohol, wearing contact lenses, eye surgery, and even hay fever can also exacerbate the condition.

"What's fascinating is that some patients with very dry eyes can feel completely fine, while others with only mild symptoms can be utterly debilitated."

### What can you do if you have dry eye?

"Unfortunately, anyone can suffer from it," says Mr Dooley. "But the good news is that with a

few simple adjustments to your routine, most symptoms can be managed. While there's no outright cure for dry eye, the goal is to manage the symptoms and make life more comfortable.

"The first step is identifying the cause. I'd always advise patients to take a look at their lifestyle and environment. Are you spending long hours in front of a screen, or in an environment with dry air?

"If so, simple changes, like avoiding late nights, reducing screen time, and opting for glasses instead of contact lenses can make a big difference.

"If Blepharitis is the issue, a daily routine of cleaning your eyelids can help improve gland function and tear quality. The cornerstone of treatment is ocular lubricants — available as drops, gels, or ointments. These are often available over the counter, making them easy to access.

"Heated eye masks may help with blepharitis symptoms in some patients," says Mr Dooley.

"They are an at-home and self-administered treatment. There several types, but the simplest is reusable heated eye mask, which is heated for a short period in a domestic microwave. Obviously, with any such device, one has to be cautious, to avoid over-heating the mask, as that could cause a serious burn.

"Used routinely, some patients will experience a diminution of symptoms due to ameliorated meibomian gland function. They can be used in addition to the other treatment modalities."

### Do I need to get medical help?

"For mild cases where symptoms are occasional, lubricant eye drops as needed are usually enough," says Mr Dooley.

"For those experiencing daily discomfort, a more consistent routine is recommended. Gels in the morning and evening, paired with drops throughout the day, can help keep symptoms at bay.

"Importantly, it's best to use these products proactively before the eyes feel dry. Once dry, the mucin layer of the tear film doesn't rehydrate easily, so it's easier to prevent dryness than to treat it.

"Ointments also provide excellent lubrication but can blur your vision, making them impractical for daily use. However, they're great for 'rescue' situations during severe flare-ups.

Other treatments, such as antibiotics, anti-inflammatory drops, and specialised lid therapies, can be considered based on the individual case."

### Are there any other treatments we should know about?

"Management of dry eye may involve the use of over-the-counter artificial tear drops, prescrip-

tion eye drops, medications aimed at reducing eyelid inflammation, or procedures designed to block the tear ducts to prevent rapid drainage of tears,” says Ms Budimlija.

“Intense Pulsed Light (IPL) therapy has shown effectiveness in treating dry eye syndrome by stimulating the Meibomian glands in the eyelids, thereby enhancing the quality of the tear film.

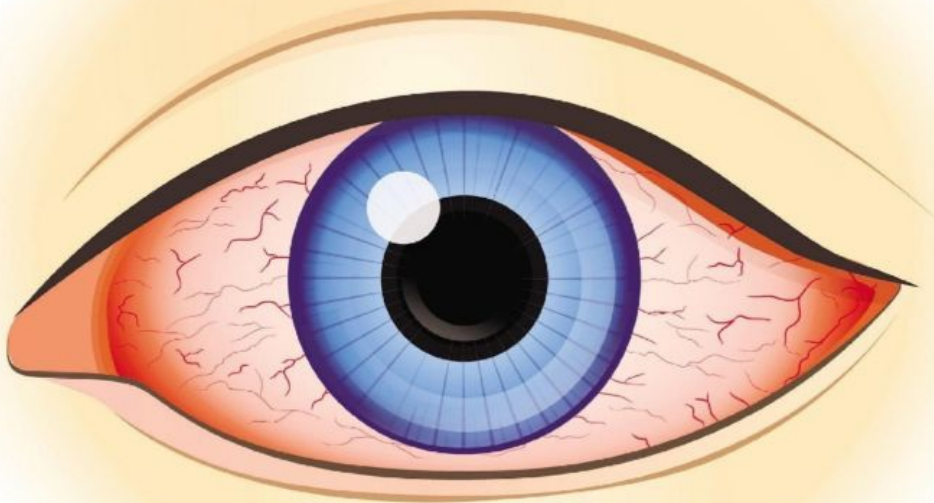
“Furthermore, implementing lifestyle modifications, including the use of a humidifier, scheduling regular breaks from digital screens, and steering clear of smoke and windy environments, can contribute to the relief of dry eye symptoms. It is advisable to seek guidance from an eye care specialist for tailored treatment alternatives.”

Do take action, rather than suffering in silence.

“Dry eye may be a common and persistent problem, but with the right strategies and support, most people can successfully manage their symptoms,” says Mr Dooley.

“If you’re struggling with dry eyes or simply want some tailored advice, don’t hesitate to reach out to an expert. After all, your eyes are worth it!”

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Red eye can be reduced with simple lifestyle changes.  
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