

Senior Digest

FEBRUARY 1992

H E A L T H

'Dry eyes' condition, not curable, but treatable

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"Dry eyes" is a condition that affects many seniors, and technically, it means poor tear production. To most it sounds like a simple, temporary inconvenience. What most people do not realize, however, is that dry eyes can become a serious problem that demands the attention of an eye care professional.

Most people's eyes tend to become drier with age, which is why "dry eyes" is a common complaint of the mature patient. Dry eyes also can result from a dry or windy environment, health problems (arthritis or Sjogren's syndrome) and certain systemic medications - especially decongestants, anti-depressants and cold medicines.

Symptoms vary, but those most commonly experienced include irritated, scratchy eyes, redness of the eyes, a feeling of a foreign body in the eye, blurred vision and an increased sensitivity to light. No matter what the cause --- age or an environmen-

tal condition - dry eyes, if left untreated, can become more than a temporary irritation and, in some cases, can result in damage and impaired vision.

If you are experiencing these symptoms, you should visit your optometrist. He or she should specifically test you for "dry eyes," which includes measuring the amount and distribution of tears. The eye care specialist will also need to ask you about your everyday activities, medications you are taking and about environmental factors that could be causing or aggravating your symptoms. Based on this information and the results of your dry eyes test, your eye doctor will make recommendations for treatment.

Treatments can decrease irritation and protect good vision, although dry eyes cannot be cured. Possible treatments include: using artificial tears or lubricating ointments; avoiding environmental conditions such as wind and dust; increasing the level of humidity (particularly in your bedroom); avoiding (or at least being aware of) low humidi-

ty environments, such as airplanes and shopping malls; and inserting small plugs (punctal plugs) in the corner of the eyes to slow drainage and loss of tears.

Also, if you participate in sports, wearing airtight goggles often will protect you from tear loss or additional drying (from chlorine particularly, if you are a swimmer). And, for those of you who wear (or want to wear) contact lenses, you should consult a contact lens specialist regarding the special contact lens needs of the dry eyes patient.

Remember, treating the problem is only possible after you take the first step. Visit your eye doctor to keep your eyes healthy. And be sure to tell him or her about any symptoms you may be experiencing, so the doctor can most appropriately assess your condition to protect your vision.