

## Dry Eyes

### What Is Dry Eyes?

Dry eyes occur when the eyes produce too few tears to lubricate and protect themselves and so, are easily prone to irritation. The main cause of dry eyes is a lack of tear production or an increase in the evaporation of tears. The latter is commonly linked to a problem in the oil glands in the eyelid, a condition called meibomitis. Dry eyes are also often related to external factors that worsen these conditions, such as working in an air-conditioned environment.

### Who Is At Risk Of Getting Dry Eyes?

#### You are more likely to have dry eyes if:

- You are exposed to a harsh environment with pollutants such as haze and smoke.
- You spend time in low-humidity, air-conditioned places often, such as the office or on airplanes.
- You are over the age of 60. The rate of tear flow decreases as we age. Dry eyes are more common in post-menopausal women.
- You wear contact lenses. Some contact lenses absorb more moisture than others, drying the eye.
- You take medications that can cause dry eyes as a side effect. These include antihistamines for allergies and runny nose, decongestants for sinusitis, acne pills and certain kinds of blood pressure medication.
- You work for long periods of time with computers.
- Focusing on a static object for long periods decreases the frequency that you blink. This can happen if you engage in long periods of near-work activities such as reading, sewing or watching TV. Blinking at regular intervals is essential to recoat the surface of the eye with a film of tears.

### What Are The Signs And Symptoms?

#### Telltale symptoms include:

- Itchy eyes
- A burning feeling or 'tiredness'
- Redness of the eyes
- Watery eyes
- Sensitivity to bright light
- Sandy or gritty feeling in the eyes

## **How Is Dry Eyes Treated?**

A proper eye assessment is required to determine the cause of your dry eyes. Your doctor will then advise you on the appropriate treatments and how you can alleviate their effects.

### **If Your Dry Eyes Are Caused By A Lack Of Tear Production**

In mild cases, the use of preserved artificial tears up to four times a day may be enough to substitute the lost moisture and relieve the eye. Preparations containing electrolytes like sodium, potassium, calcium and magnesium salts will supplement your natural tears.

In severe cases, the patient may be prescribed preservative-free artificial tears which can be used more frequently or on an ad hoc basis.

Eye ointments are also effective and lubricate the eye for longer periods. However, they have a tendency to blur vision and hence are best applied before bedtime.

Normally, tears are drained out of the eye into our nose through openings in our eyelids called punctums. Dry eyes can be treated by blocking these openings with punctal plugs. Rather than draining out of the eye, tears remain, reducing dryness.

In severe cases of dry eyes, the eyes are often inflamed. This requires the use of eye drops that can reduce inflammation. Examples of such eye drops are steroids and cyclosporin. As these are strong medications with potentially severe side effects, your doctor will advise when and how they should be applied.

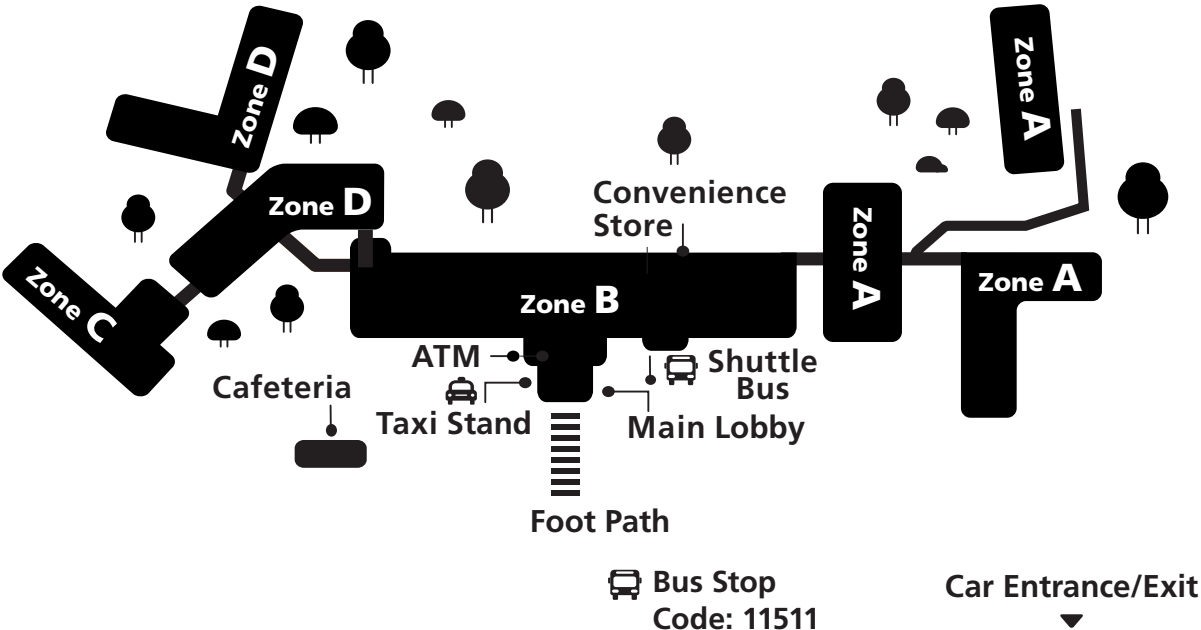
### **If Your Dry Eyes Are Caused By Increased Evaporation Of Tears**

Tears have a film over them. This consists of a layer of oil that reduces tear evaporation. This oil is produced by glands along the eyelids. When the quality of this oil is bad, tears evaporate quickly, drying out the eyes. The conditions that affect the oil in this way are known as blepharitis or meibomitis.

Your doctor will explain to you how these can be treated such as applying warm compresses or using commercial eyelid cleaning solutions.

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