

## Dry Eye Syndrome

One of the most common problems seen in the eye doctor's office is **dry eye syndrome**. Symptoms include burning, stinging or a gritty sensation. The eyes may become red and irritated. A patient may not be able to tolerate wearing contact lenses. Often patients complain of excess tearing when they actually have dry eyes. How can this be? This is because a person has two types of tearing. The main form of tearing is "baseline" tearing. This occurs naturally and continuously. A second form of tearing is called "reflex" tearing. Reflex tearing occurs during such events as cutting an onion, watching a sad movie or getting punched in the nose. A person who has truly dry eyes may produce tears reflexively thus causing excessive tearing!

There are many **causes** of dry eye syndrome. Medication such as antidepressants, antihistamines (for seasonal allergies) and cold preparations can induce dry eye syndrome. Contact lens wear can exacerbate dry eyes. For many people, the dryness is worse in the afternoon and the evenings. Also, dry eye syndrome is worse in the winter when many buildings are heated by forced hot air heat. Long periods of reading or staring at a computer screen can aggravate the symptoms of dry eyes. Environmental factors play a role as well. Cigarette smoke, fumes, dust and airborne particles are common irritants. Dry eye syndrome is also associated with systemic conditions such as arthritis and collagen-vascular diseases.

**Treatment** is helpful in most patients. Dry eye syndrome cannot be cured but can be helped. Artificial tears which are available over-the-counter soothe the eyes and give temporary relief. The best tear drops seem to be Refresh Liquigel®, Systane®, TheraTears® and Refresh Celluvisc®. These drops last roughly one hour per application and must be repeated at frequent intervals. Ointments last longer but they may blur vision. Ointments are most effective at night. The best ointments are Genteal Gel® and Refresh PM®. Tear preparation without preservatives are preferable to those with preservatives. The **next stage of treatment** would be blocking the opening of the tear duct drainage system with silicone "punctal plugs" (**PUNCTAL OCCLUSION**). This drainage system normally carries tears away from the eye into the nose. By blocking this drainage of tears, punctal occlusion increases the tears available to the eye thus relieving most dry eye symptoms. This quick and painless procedure is performed in the eye doctor's office. Also, an omega-3 nutritional supplement taken orally is thought to improve symptoms of dry eye syndrome. Lastly, a prescription eye drop named Restasis®, has recently been approved by the FDA. Restasis may help induce the natural production of a person's tears.

In conclusion, if a person experiences dry eye symptoms, an evaluation should be scheduled. With proper diagnosis and treatment, the majority of patients can be helped.