

Red and dry eyes

The Health Column

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It is often said that eyes are the windows to a person's soul but they are also our window onto the world. However, every year 10,000 Australians go blind and around 200,000 Australians have vision impairment that cannot be corrected by spectacles. Every 65 minutes an Australian loses part or all of their vision. Maintaining good eye health should be a priority for all.



Every year, for the month of July, The Eye Surgeons' Foundation (the fundraising arm of The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists and The Ophthalmic Research Institute of Australia) runs JulEYE – the Foundation's national eye health awareness month.

JulEYE aims to raise community awareness of eye health issues, as well as raise funds for research projects into the causes and cures of vision impairment and blindness. The campaign also supports international and domestic development projects whose goals are aligned with those of The Eye Surgeons' Foundation.

Red eyes and dry eyes are common eye problems. Redness and dryness are symptoms of many eye conditions. Some of these conditions are not serious, but others are serious and may affect eyesight.

A red eye can be a sign of eye inflammation. The most common cause of red eye(s) is conjunctivitis. Conjunctivitis can be caused by allergy, irritation or infection. The treatment of eye redness depends on its cause and can include:

- decongestant eye drops to reduce redness
- antihistamine eye drops to relieve redness and itching
- antibiotic eye drops to treat bacterial (not viral) conjunctivitis.

Dry eyes can be caused by:

- not producing enough tears
- poor quality tears

- tears not staying in the eyes long enough
- a low blinking rate (e.g. when reading or using a computer).

Dry eyes can be relieved with lubricating eye drops, gels and ointments.

To prevent red eyes and dry eyes:

- Wear wrap-around sunglasses when outside in bright light, windy, dry or allergy conditions.
- Wear eye protection when swimming or working with machines and chemicals.
- Try to find and avoid allergy triggers.
- Do not rub your eyes.
- Avoid blowing air in your eyes (e.g. hair dryers, fans, car heaters).
- Blink more often to relieve dryness.
- Take regular breaks when reading or using a computer.
- Use good lighting.
- Do not wear contact lenses if you have an eye infection.
- Limit alcohol.
- Avoid smoke (e.g. cigarette smoke).

Your local pharmacy is your health destination. Doctors, pharmacists and optometrists can help find the cause of red eyes or dry eyes and advise on treatment. Your pharmacist can help you to select the right treatment for minor eye conditions like conjunctivitis and red eye. Some eye drops and ointments can be obtained from a pharmacy without a prescription. Your pharmacist will always refer you to a doctor if they feel a condition requires more attention.

Regular testing from birth encourages good eye health and helps to avoid permanent damage and vision loss. The Eye Surgeons' Foundation recommends eye testing every two years. Ask relatives about your family's eye health history, and have your eyes tested, during JulEYE.

If you notice any changes in your vision, or have any concerns, you should see your doctor, ophthalmologist or optometrist immediately. Your local GP or optometrist can give you a referral to an ophthalmologist for testing.

Up-to-date advice about eye conditions and treatments is also available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care Fact Cards. Titles include *Glaucoma* and *Red and dry eyes*.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location, phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.