

All those in favor, say 'eye'

Dry, itchy eyes? Remedies are available

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Dry, itchy, watery eyes — all an unavoidable part of winter, right? Not necessarily.

You could be suffering from dry eye, a condition that leaves the eye with too few tears or too much in-eye debris for those tears to lubricate effectively. It affects an estimated 10 million Americans, according to the American Optometric Association.

"It's actually pretty common, and it's more common in this area now during the heating season," said Dr. John Warren, an optometrist and owner of Warren Eye Care in Racine and Oak Creek.

"Not blaming the heating and air conditioning industry," Warren teased, "but the ambient humidity goes down dramatically from Thanksgiving to Easter — there's lower outdoor humidity and there's lower humidity indoors — and I see a lot more patients complaining of the problem at this time of year."

Many people mistake dry eye for a side effect of the weather.

"A lot of people think it's because it's windy out and there's nothing they can do," Warren said.

But identifying the symptoms early can usually help eliminate the issue.

"The things that I hear that make me think of dry eye are red, scratchy, burning, blurry vision and, actually, watering eyes, believe it or not," Warren said. "Patients look at you like you're crazy when you say, 'You have dry eyes,' when they're crying all the time. But the eye becomes irritated, and it dumps more tears in. And, in some cases, it can make it worse."

Dry eye is treatable, although Warren admitted it might take a combination of over-the-counter and in-office intervention.

"The best thing you should do when you start having symptoms is get some artificial tears," Warren said. "Not something Ben Stein sells to get the red out, because if you're just treating the redness, you might treat the redness but not the underlying condition."

Warren suggested a basic over-the-counter eye lubricant. In fact, he said, if you think you have dry eye, you might want to pick up several.

"They're not all the same," Warren explained. "Artificial tears are like Pepsi, Coke and Mountain Dew. Some people drink only Pepsi and swear by it. Some people only drink Coke. Some people only drink Mountain Dew. Some people drink all three and they're fine. It just depends on your eye."

Most optometrists suggest trying artificial tears for five days. If there's still an issue, then consider making an appointment.



FILE PHOTO
Contact lens wearers are more susceptible to dry, itchy eyes.



SHUTTERSTOCK PHOTO

Dry, itchy eyes can be treated with prescription eye drops. Those more at-risk for this condition could use a natural tears drop as well.

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Area optometrist on the misconceptions about dry eye

An in-office visit should involve looking at the eyes with a bio-microscope.

"That's the thing where you stick your chin in the dish, and we shine a bright light in your eyes. We can actually see the tears and how the tears and the eye are getting along," Warren said.

A prescription eye lubricant, like Restasis, is a common prescription. In more extreme cases, silicon plugs can be inserted to treat dry eye.

Often, Warren said, a combination of therapies does the trick. "It's a simple concept, but it



Five things to know about dry eye

1. Dry eye is a diagnosable condition that leaves the eye with too few tears or too much in-eye debris for those tears to lubricate effectively.
2. More than 10 million Americans experience dry eye, which is often made worse by winter weather conditions.
3. Older adults, women, people with certain medical conditions (arthritis, diabetes, thyroid disease) and certain medications (decongestants, antihistamines and antidepressants) could be more likely to experience dry eye. Certain cosmetics can cause dry eye. And people who have had laser vision correction or other eye surgeries also are at higher risk for dry eye.
4. Dry eye is commonly treated with over-the-counter artificial tears, although prescription medications are available.
5. Staying hydrated and increasing the humidity in your environment can help prevent dry eye.

— American Optometric Association

can be a complex disease to fix," Warren said.

Risk factors

That's why knowing if you're at risk and preventing dry eye before it starts are so important.

According to the American Optometric Association:

- People over age 65 have a greater chance of getting dry eye.
- Hormonal changes make women, especially those who are pregnant, nearing menopause or post-menopausal, more likely to experience dry eye.

■ People with thyroid issues, diabetes and arthritis are at a greater risk.

■ Certain medications also can increase the chances of getting dry eye, including some decongestants, antihistamines and antidepressants.

■ Those who wear contact lenses, especially soft lenses, or who have had laser vision correction or other eye surgeries are also at higher risk.

Eye on prevention

Even people in those risk categories can prevent dry eye, however.

A general humidifier can add moisture to the air inside homes and offices, while a personal humidifier or mister can help individuals in hospitals, schools and factories, where the air is typically drier.

"You can also try to prevent it by staying hydrated," said Warren, an optometrist for 23 years and a former president of the Wisconsin Optometric Association. "Most people in the Midwest are mildly dehydrated. They don't drink enough water ... I say as I reach for a Diet Coke."

People's Pharmacy: Don't run out of Zyrtec on a remote island

Question: I live on a remote island in the South Pacific that is almost a 12-hour flight from Los Angeles. A week ago, I ran out of Zyrtec. During the next four days, I experienced some of the worst hives and itchy symptoms in my entire life. Benadryl was my only relief, and working three jobs is difficult enough without the drowsiness Benadryl causes.

Then I read all the stories on your website about people experiencing unbearable itching when they stopped Zyrtec. I immediately ran out to the only place on island that sells Zyrtec and found instant relief. When I am finally ready to take the plunge of quitting Zyrtec, at least I have an idea what kind of



The People's Pharmacy
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punishment to expect.

Answer: We have received so many reports of itching and hives associated with stopping cetirizine (Zyrtec) that we contacted the Food and Drug Administration. The agency has not responded.

Like you, most people don't realize that running out of Zyrtec could trigger prolonged itching. If enough individuals tell the FDA about this complication, perhaps

a warning will be included on the label. The best way to report such an adverse drug reaction is at www.FDAanswer.gov/MedWatch.

Parkinson's news

Question: I have Parkinson's disease (PD), and it is getting progressively worse. My hands shake so much that it is almost impossible to hold a cup without spilling its contents.

Given the recent study using reduced doses of the FDA-approved anti-leukemia drug nilotinib to successfully treat PD, should I ask my neurologist to prescribe it off-label?

Answer: Nilotinib (Tasigna) is a leukemia medicine that has shown promise in a pilot study of 12 people with Parkinson's disease. Some

demonstrated impressive improvement, but the research is still in its early days.

Your neurologist could legally prescribe Tasigna for Parkinson's disease, but most physicians are cautious about prescribing unproven medications. It would be worth a conversation, though.

Although the dose for Parkinson's disease was much lower than the dose for leukemia, the drug would still be expensive. Cancer treatment with Tasigna costs more than \$10,000 a month. Insurance rarely covers off-label prescriptions.

We don't know whether the people in the pilot study experienced serious complications from taking low-dose Tasigna for six months. Used in higher doses for cancer, Tasigna can cause rash, elevated blood sugar,

headache, blood disorders, digestive upset, fatigue, high cholesterol, fever and painful joints, along with other side effects.

Acid suppressors, bones

Question: My wife and I are in our 70s. She has been taking Nexium for years. We recently read that this kind of medication could increase her risk for bone fracture. How could this be true?

Answer: Acid-suppressing drugs such as esomeprazole (Nexium), lansoprazole (Prevacid) and omeprazole (Prilosec) interfere with the absorption of minerals such as calcium and magnesium. A recent article in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society (November 2015) suggests that taking such proton-pump inhibitors

for more than two months is risky for older people. It can lead to C. diff intestinal infections as well as bone loss and fractures.

We are sending you our Guide to Digestive Disorders with a discussion of the pros and cons of these medications and the alternatives. Anyone who would like a copy, please send \$3 in check or money order with a long (No. 10), stamped (70 cents), self-addressed envelope to: Graedon's People's Pharmacy, No. G-3, P.O. Box 52027, Durham, NC 27717-2027. It also can be downloaded for \$2 from our website: www.peoplespharmacy.com.

In their column, Joe and Teresa Graedon answer letters from readers. Write to them via their website: www.PeoplesPharmacy.com.

COMING WEDNESDAY: Picking a six-pack of Christmas beers