

ICKY EYE INFECTIONS—

AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

The windows to our souls
sometimes get swollen,
itchy, and caked with crust.
Here's how to keep them
healthy and clear.

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GIVEN HOW IMPORTANT OUR EYES ARE, we don't exactly treat them with reverence. We rub them, stick little pieces of plastic on our corneas to avoid glasses, and use mascara that we may or may not have had since the Obama Administration. "Eyes are a mucous membrane, and they're constantly bombarded with things from the environment—irritants, allergens, and dirty fingers," says ophthalmologist Daniel C. Brocks, M.D., medical director at Boston Sight.

This, of course, can lead to many problems—specifically, infections of the eye. Fortunately, most are very treatable, says Melissa Barnett, O.D., director of optometry at the University of California, Davis, but it's important to get symptoms such as redness, itching, burning, pain, tearing, and discharge checked and treated promptly so an infection won't get worse and potentially threaten your vision. "A lot of these things may seem like pink eye [a common infection of the membrane that lines the eyelid and eyeball], but they can actually be something deeper," says ophthalmologist Ami Shah Vira, M.D., of Texas Neuro Eye & Plastic Surgery.

Here, three common ways you may be putting your eyes at risk—and how to take care of them better.

RISKY MOVE:

Wearing contact lenses longer than you should

IT CAN CAUSE:

BACTERIAL KERATITIS

■ We get it. Sometimes you're in bed watching *The Late Show* and the next thing you know, you're waking up at 8 a.m. with your contacts stuck hard to your eyeballs. It's estimated that around a third of contact users occasionally sleep in them, but this ocular no-no significantly increases the risk of serious infection. (A few lens types are approved for overnight wear, but most ophthalmologists do not prescribe them because of concerns about infection, says Dr. Brocks.)

"When I see someone with an eye infection, the first thing I ask is, 'Are you sleeping with your lenses in?'" The answer is almost always yes," says Dr. Brocks. According to the CDC, sleeping in soft lenses increases the risk of infection as much as eightfold compared with taking them out before bed.

Here's why: If you're not disinfecting your contacts properly, bacteria and fungi can accumulate on them—while you sleep, with your closed eyes trapping those microbes, infection can take root. Also, sleeping in your contacts reduces the amount of oxygen that can reach your corneas, which need oxygen to be healthy, explains Dr. Brocks.

One of the biggest risks of sleeping in contacts is keratitis, an infection of the cornea that can be caused by a virus, bacteria, fungus, or parasites.



Treatments include medicated eye drops (antibiotic, antiviral, or antifungal depending on the type of infection).

► WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Symptoms of keratitis include red eyes, tearing, intense pain, clouding of vision, and sensitivity to light. "When the cornea becomes infected, it can develop an ulcer [an open sore] that can scar over," explains Dr. Shah Vira. Corneal infections can lead to the need for a cornea transplant and, in the worst-case scenario, can result in permanent vision loss or even loss of the eye.

► EYE-WISE BEHAVIOR

Always use your contacts exactly as

recommended, which in almost all cases means taking them out at night and disinfecting them. Also make sure everything that comes in contact with your lenses—including your fingers, the lens case, and the bottle of cleaning solution—is clean. Never use tap water to clean lenses, as it can contain an amoeba that can cause a particularly dangerous form of keratitis; don't wear contacts when sick, as handling them can spread a virus to your eyes; and give yourself an occasional lens holiday so your corneas can get some extra oxygen, says Dr. Shah Vira. "Daily disposable lenses are safest, as you are getting a new, clean lens every day," says Dr. Brocks.

**RISKY MOVE:****Using lots of goopy eye makeup****IT CAN CAUSE:****BLEPHARITIS**

■ That TikTok tutorial may tell you the best way to create flirty, colorful eyes, but it probably doesn't mention the infection that can happen when the little oil ducts on the edges of your eyelids get clogged up with eyelash glue, old mascara, and glittery shadow.

Eye makeup can harm your eyes in a couple of different ways: When that mascara or liquid liner sits around past its use-by date, it starts to accumulate bacteria, which get transferred into your eye as you swipe it on. This can cause conjunctivitis (pink eye) and sties, those painful pimple-like bumps on your eyelid. But it can also clog up the

oil ducts, causing blepharitis, a bacterial inflammation of the lids. "When you wear eyeliner, mascara, or fake eyelashes, you're sticking things along the base of the eyelash that can create a blockage," explains Dr. Shah Vira, adding that oil-based sunscreen can also block the glands. To be fair, blepharitis can't always be blamed on makeup: You may just have a natural overgrowth of bacteria on your skin, or dandruff from your scalp or eyebrows might clog up those glands. There is even a rare type of blepharitis caused by tiny mites that live in eyelashes—lovely.

▶ WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Blepharitis can make you feel as if there's something in your eye. Your eye may also be itchy, irritated, and filled with gunk, especially when you wake up. The inflammation can cause blurry vision, and it may make your lashes fall out.

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▶ EYE-WISE BEHAVIOR

Replace liquid makeup every three months, and clean your eyelids every day by pressing a warm compress to them in the shower. You can also buy eyelid scrubs—pads that remove makeup and bacteria from your lids.

RISKY MOVE:**Ignoring your dry eyes****IT CAN CAUSE:****CORNEAL INFECTIONS AND ULCERS**

■ If you spend a lot of time staring at a computer, have diabetes or some autoimmune diseases, or take certain medications—or if you're simply a woman in midlife—you may be one of the more than 16 million Americans with dry eye disease. "We have this tear film that contains thousands of proteins that protect the eye and prevent infection whenever we blink," Dr. Barnett explains. But when oil production is insufficient, not only does it leave your eyes feeling dry and dusty but there aren't enough oil-based tears to wash away irritants and bacteria. Staring at screens can decrease blinking frequency, which further reduces the moisture level of the ocular surface, Dr. Barnett adds.

While dry eyes are uncomfortable, the greater risk is that when you rub them more, you may introduce anything you've touched into your eyes. That's why untreated dry eyes can lead to bacterial infections, inflammation, abrasion of the corneal surface, corneal ulcers, and even vision loss.

▶ WHAT IT FEELS LIKE

Dry eyes feel itchy and gritty, especially later in the day, and may produce mucus and be sensitive to light. With a corneal ulcer, your eyes will look blood-shot and vision may be blurry or hazy.

▶ EYE-WISE BEHAVIOR

Take breaks from screens every 20 minutes, and use preservative-free artificial tears (Dr. Brocks recommends using one-dose vials). Your doc can also prescribe medicated eye drops or a nasal spray that will help you produce better-quality tears. Tear gland procedural treatments are available as well.

**NOT SURE?
GOGGLE IT**

■ "We recommend wearing protective eyewear if you're doing anything where there's a lot of debris flying around," says Dr. Brocks. That's because a little cut in your eye can let in bacteria, leading to infection. Ask your eye doc which goggles they recommend.

Eye-threatening activities can include:

- ▶ Yard work
- ▶ DIY home improvements
- ▶ Tinkering with a car
- ▶ Riding a motorcycle
- ▶ Sanding or welding
- ▶ Playing sports