

EYE DROPS

Eyedrops contain medicines that are used to treat many eye diseases and conditions. Some are also helpful for relieving eye discomfort.

It is important to remember that all medicines, including eyedrops, can have side effects. Some side effects caused by eyedrops are local, which means they affect just the eyes. Examples of local side effects include redness of the eye, eye irritation, or blurred vision.

Most of the medication in eyedrops stays in or near the eyes, but a small amount affects the rest of the body. Eyedrops are absorbed into the body's bloodstream through mucous membranes lining the surface of the eye, and through the tear drainage system. Once in your bloodstream, the eyedrops can cause side effects in other parts of the body. Such side effects can include slow heart rate, dizziness, and headache. In general, however, there is less risk of side effects with eyedrops than with oral medicines.

USING MEDICATIONS WISELY

When your physician prescribes any medication for you, you should always be aware of the following important information:

- Make sure you know the name of the medicine. Medications may have a generic name as well as a brand name; the generic name can be found in fine print on the label.
- Make sure you know how often you need to take the medicine.

If significant discomfort and irritation occurs when using eyedrops, you should contact your ophthalmologist. Sometimes your ophthalmologist can prescribe another medication or suggest a different method of treating the problem. At times the eyedrops are so important that you may need to tolerate some mild side effects in order to treat the condition.

ALLERGIES

Be sure to let your ophthalmologist (and all of the doctors who care for you) know if you have any allergies to any medications.

Any medicine can cause an allergic reaction or allergy, even nonprescription eyedrops containing chemical preservatives. Sometimes eye medications are chemical "relatives" of drugs that may have caused you problems in the past. It is very important to tell your doctor of any past allergic reactions.

Allergic reactions to eyedrops often include itching, swelling, or a rash around the eyes. If your eyes or eyelids become redder, itchy, or swollen after you begin using an eyedrop, you should contact your ophthalmologist.

EYEDROPS DURING AN EXAM

Dilating drops

Your ophthalmologist may use eyedrops to dilate, or enlarge, the pupils of the eye. This facilitates examining the inside of your eye. Because driving may be difficult immediately after a dilated eye examination, you may need to make arrangements for a ride home after a dilated eye exam.

Anesthetic drops

Anesthetics are painkillers that numb the eyes within a few seconds. These drops should be used only in the doctor's office and never at home. Repeated use at home can harm the surface of the eye, which could lead to an infection or serious scarring of the cornea.

NON PRESCRIPTION EYEDROPS

You can buy many eyedrops without a prescription. Even though you can buy them over the counter, these eyedrops may still contain medications.

Eyedrops should be used according to the directions of your physician and the directions on the package. Be aware of any symptoms you might experience since nonprescription eyedrops can also cause an allergic reaction.

Drops called artificial tears are solutions that can soothe irritated or dry eyes. Most artificial tears can be used five to six times per day. If drops are needed more frequently, preservative free artificial tears are available and can be used as often as needed.

Decongestant eyedrops contain a medicine that whitens the eyes by shrinking, or constricting, blood vessels. While decongestant drops don't improve the health of your eye, they make the eye appear less red. If you use these eyedrops infrequently and for a short duration of time, they are usually not harmful. If you use them often, your eyes may actually become more red and irritated when the eyedrops are discontinued.

PRESCRIPTION EYE DROPS

Steroid (corticosteroids) eyedrops

These eyedrops are potent and should be used only under your ophthalmologist's guidance. Using them over time can potentially lead to glaucoma and cataracts in certain cases. Using them for an eye problem without telling your ophthalmologist can be dangerous.

The benefits of using steroids are substantial, and they are prescribed often. The generic names of common corticosteroids are:

- Prednisolone;
- Dexamethasone;
- Hydrocortisone;
- Fluoromethalone;
- Medrysone;
- Rimexolone

Eyedrops to treat infection

Your ophthalmologist will generally prescribe eyedrops if you have an infection. Not all "red" or "pink" eyes necessarily mean an infection is present. No single medicine is effective against all types of infection. Some infections cannot be treated with any available eyedrop. Once treated for an eye infection, you should notice improvement in your condition within several days. If your condition becomes worse while you are using the eyedrops, contact your ophthalmologist.

Eyedrops to treat glaucoma

Glaucoma is a disease of the optic nerve caused by high pressure inside the eye. Glaucoma is a leading cause of blindness, but loss of sight from glaucoma can be prevented with early treatment. Eyedrops applied every day are used to lower the pressure within the eye. Glaucoma medications reduce the fluid pressure in the eye either by decreasing the amount of fluid forming in the eye or by increasing the eye's ability to drain fluid. This fluid, called aqueous humor, is inside the eye and is different from your tears

SIDE EFFECTS FROM GLAUCOMA EYEDROPS

Different glaucoma eyedrops can cause different side effects. Because glaucoma medicines can keep you from losing your sight, you may have to tolerate some mild side effects.

Beta-blockers: They can cause:

- breathing problems for those with asthma or emphysema;
- slow or irregular heartbeat;
- depression;
- decrease in sex drive (impotence).

Alpha agonists: They can cause:

- a red eye or red skin around the eye;
- dry mouth;
- fatigue or decreased energy.

Carbonic anhydrase inhibitors: They can cause:

- eye redness or irritation;
- skin rash (especially in individuals with known allergy to Sulfa drugs);
- change in taste (especially with carbonated beverages);
- stomach upset or nausea;
- fatigue and decreased energy.

Prostaglandin analogs or prostamides: They can cause:

- eye redness or irritation;
- very rarely, a darkening in eye color (mostly in hazel or blue to green eyes);
- increase in thickness and number of eyelashes;
- joint aches or flu-like syndrome.

Many new eyedrops are becoming available. Eye medications can cause eye allergies, irritation, or other side effects, as listed above. If you experience any side effects, contact your ophthalmologist. Tell your other doctors if you are using eyedrops for glaucoma.