

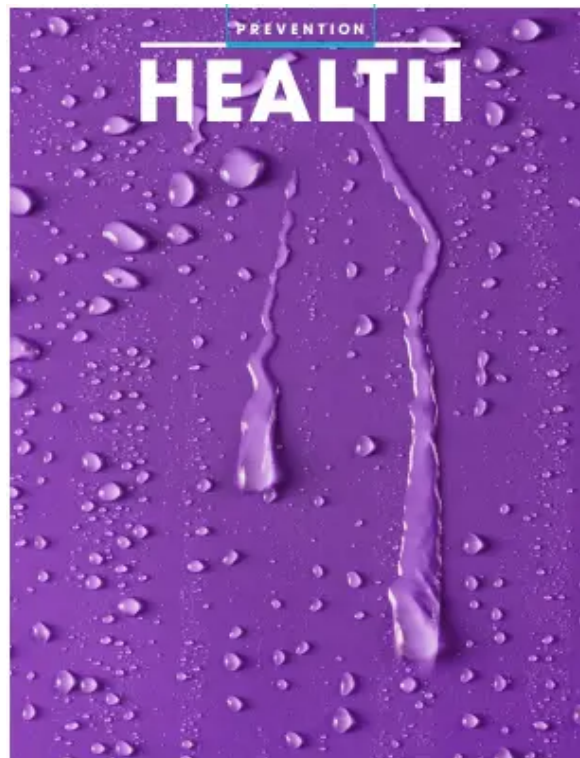
- Emotions

Crying

Just about any emotion can make your eyes start leaking like a broken faucet. Here's why.

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What's really going on when we do it



YOU WATCH A SAPPY MOVIE, are touched by a poignant memory, or just have a really rough day, and suddenly salty tears are trickling down your cheeks. Crying is something we've all done since the day we were born, but why exactly does the body do this? Here, ophthalmologists explain the waterworks.

WHY DO WE CRY?

■ While most animals cry out with sounds when they're in pain or distress, liquid tears triggered by emotions are a uniquely human phenomenon. In general, tears are made up of salt water (produced by the lacrimal glands above the eyes and eyelids) along with mucus and oil, explains Michelle Andreoli, M.D., clinical spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology. There are three basic types of tears: Basal tears provide constant lubrication and protection for the cornea every time you blink, while reflex tears are produced in response to irritants like dust, smoke, and chopped onions. Emotional tears well up when the brain's limbic system, which controls mood and emotions, is activated by strong feelings or intense situations. "The limbic system signals cranial nerves within the eyelids, tear glands, and facial muscles to produce tears," says James Kelly, M.D., founder of Kelly Vision Center in New York City.

The theory is that humans developed this unique talent for crying as a way to connect. “Emotional tears demonstrate vulnerability and empathy,” says Dr. Kelly.

And it’s not just when you’re sad...

■ While crying is most often associated with sadness, any strong emotion can trigger the same reaction in the limbic system, says Dr. Kelly. That’s why you might start to tear up at Beethoven’s “Ode to Joy” or feel overwhelmed with relief when you get good news from your doctor.

WHEN TEARS TELL A DIFFERENT STORY

As you get older, you might find yourself randomly tearing up, a sign that you may have dry eye syndrome. “Basal tear production slows with age,” Dr. Andreoli explains. With less oily fluid, the ducts are triggered to release watery tears to keep things moist, but these evaporate quickly. Contact lenses and certain medications can also cause dry eye. Check with your ophthalmologist for the best treatment options for you, she advises.