- Eye



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WHAT'S MAKING YOUR EYES IRRITATED?

If your peepers are feeling itchy or prickly, this handy primer can help you quell the discomfort.

BY KATE ROCKWOOD

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Itchy Eyes

can be uncomfortable, even crazy-making, and many of us experience them at one time or another. If you're currently rubbing away, figuring out what's bugging your eyeballs is key to addressing it fast. Below, a few big reasons and how to deal with them.

CAUSE #1:

ALLERGIES OR ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

We're looking at you, Fluffy. "The most common reason for itchy eyes is allergies to environmental things like pet dander and pollen that can cause a condition called allergic conjunctivitis, which involves mild redness, burning, and watering of the eyes," says Nicholas Green, O.D., an assistant professor at Nova Southeastern University Florida's College of Optometry.

If you're scratching your head right now (along with your eyes) because you don't have a pet, know this: The Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America (AAFA) says pet dander can linger anywhere an animal has been and even in places they haven't been, as dander clings to our clothing. Just working alongside a pet owner can be enough to cause a reaction. (Cat dander is especially "sticky," lingering longer than dog dander, the AAFA reports.)

Likewise, allergic reactions to the environment can be set off by subtle triggers—if you're visiting a new region, the vegetation may cause irritation, or if you've recently acquired a new plant, just having it in your house can do it. Certain ferns and species of ivy, for example, are common culprits.

WHAT TO DO:

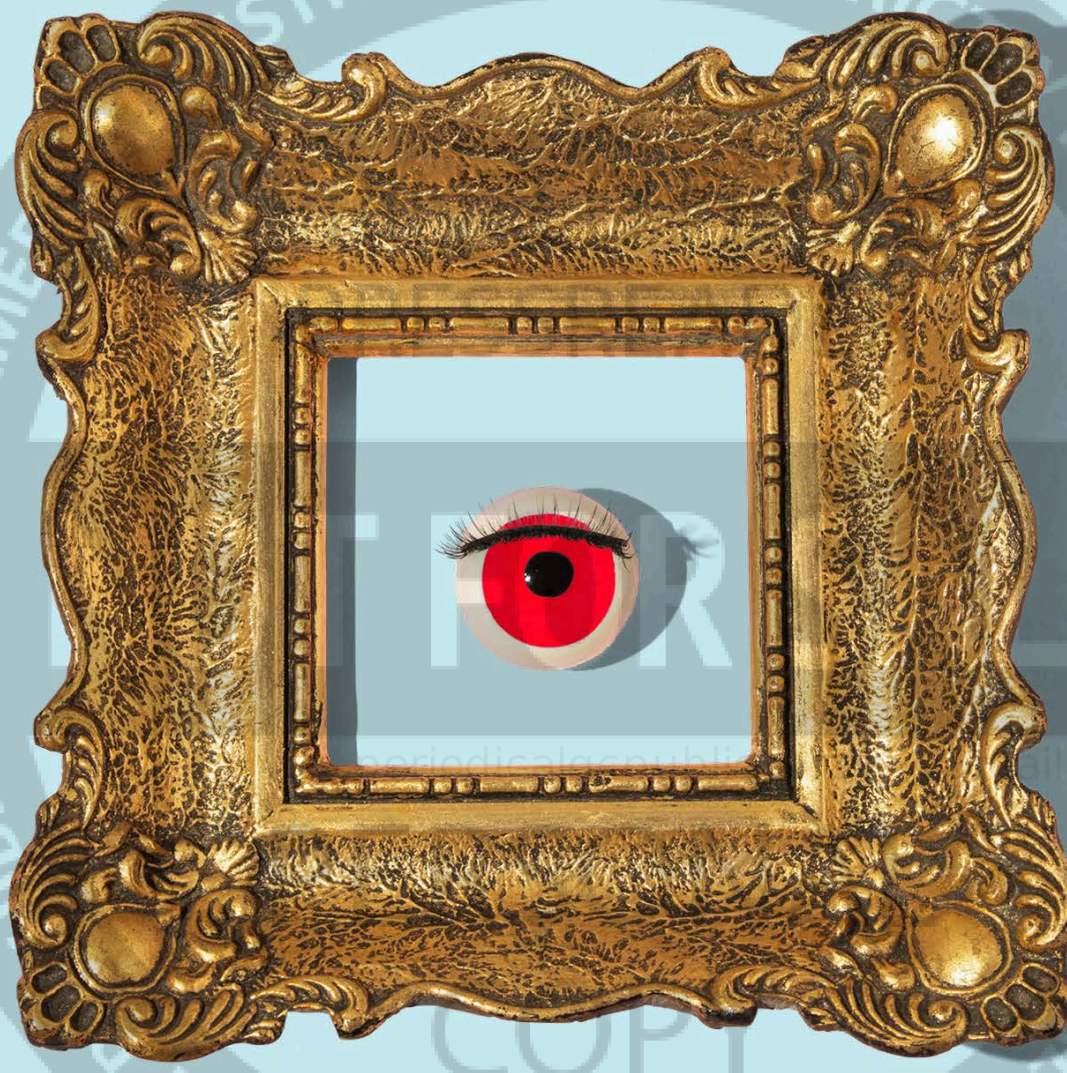
Avoid, avoid, avoid: That's the name of the game when it comes to allergens. "For example, if you know animal dander causes your eyes to get itchy, try to avoid those animals as much as possible," says Green. "If this isn't practical, the next step is to pick up some over-the-counter anti-allergy eye drops, which can be very effective."

CAUSE #2:

DRY EYES

A surprising itchy-eye culprit? Too much computer use, says Nashville ophthalmologist Melissa Toyos, M.D. Computer vision syndrome (CVS) results in part from the fact that we blink a lot less than usual—more than 50% less, in fact—when we stare at screens. Certain medications, including antihistamines, sleep aids, blood pressure meds, antidepressants, and glaucoma or topical ophthalmic

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medications, can also contribute to dry eyes. Aging is an issue too—the prevalence of dry eyes increases after age 50, research shows—and dry eyes are more common in women than in men (women start to produce fewer and poorer-quality tears in their 50s).

WHAT TO DO:

Dr. Toyos recommends addressing dry eyes with over-the-counter or prescription eye drops, an anti-inflammatory diet, and vitamins that can support a healthy tear film. These include vitamins A, D, and B_{12}, which are available as supplements but are also present in foods such as sweet potato, fish, peppers, broccoli, carrots, and ricotta cheese (vitamin A); fish, dairy, mushrooms, and fortified orange juice and almond milk (vitamin D); and beef, tuna, and eggs (vitamin B_{12}). And be sure to stay hydrated—drinking enough water is essential for adequate tear production. If you experience itchiness from dryness after taking certain prescription drugs, let your doctor know so they can source an alternative.

HEALTH

CAUSE #3:

MAKEUP AND/OR LASH EXTENSIONS

"Everyone loves eyelash extensions—except your eye care provider," says Dr. Toyos. "The glue can be very irritating, and the artificial lash materials can direct air currents onto your eye, worsening dryness." Even if you just stick with eyeliner and mascara, make sure you're vigilant about using them properly. "Eye makeup can absolutely cause itchiness," says Green. "Most of the problems stem from improper use such as not removing makeup completely every night, or from sensitivity to preservatives." Certain ingredients (such as beeswax) can also cause itchy contact dermatitis.

WHAT TO DO:

Just say no to eyelash extensions. If you're a makeup wearer, follow Green's instructions: Remove all makeup around the eyes every night before bed; avoid waterproof makeup, which is more difficult to take off completely; don't apply eyeliner on the watery rims between your eyelashes and your eyeballs (a practice known as tightlining), as it can block the eyelid glands or even cause makeup to become embedded in your inner eyelids; stop using makeup after its expiration date, since it can harbor bacteria; and never share eye makeup. If you do develop an eye infection, throw away all your used eye makeup to



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avoid reinfecting yourself, and see a doctor, especially if your symptoms include "mucus coming from the eyes, constant watering of the eyes, any pain, extreme redness, changes in vision, or discomfort when looking at lights or in a bright room, or if you notice symptoms while wearing contact lenses," says Green.

CAUSE #4:

AN INFECTION

Eye infections can occur because of a virus or bacteria—pink eye can be due to either, though in adults it's usually viral. "Normally, people with this condition will have symptoms beyond itchiness such as pain, significant redness, mucus discharge, or changes in vision," says Green. Another common eye infection is a stye—a small, often sore bump at the base of the eyelashes or within the eyelid that's most often caused by staphylococcus bacteria.

WHAT TO DO:

If you're having symptoms like those described above, see a doctor. These conditions won't always resolve on their own or with over-the-counter remedies—clearing them up may require prescription medications. Most people know that bacterial pink eye may necessitate antibiotic drops, but it may surprise you to learn that a stye is often best treated professionally too. "Hot compresses over the stye may help in some cases, but antibiotic eye drops or oral medications may be needed," says Green. Start by putting an eye mask that can be heated electronically or in the microwave on your eye to encourage healing; if it hasn't begun to improve after 48 hours, it's time to see a doctor.

CAUSE #5:

EYE MITES

As gross as it may sound, we all have tiny critters living on our eyelashes; they're mites called Demodex that reside within our lash follicles. Dr. Toyos explains, "It's normal to have a certain number of bacteria and Demodex on the skin and around the eyes—they're beneficial in removing dead skin cells and oil." But when they proliferate beyond normal numbers, it becomes a problem known as Demodex blepharitis. "When there is an imbalance, which is especially common in people with rosacea and other forms of inflammation, the Demodex overgrow and create dandruff on the lashes," Dr. Toyos adds.

WHAT TO DO:

Your eye doctor will be able to confirm that these eye mites are what's causing your itch. Green says that an infestation of Demodex is commonly treated with over-the-counter eye-specific tea tree oil products—but if the issue persists or becomes chronic, ask about a prescription drug for Demodex blepharitis, Xdemvy, which earned FDA approval in 2023.

For more ways to keep your eyes healthy year-round, go to prevention.com/eye-health-facts.

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