

Wendy Haaf answers your questions about health, nutrition, and well-being



The May issue's "Your Health Questions" query on postnasal drip prompted me to write. I just turned 70 and have had postnasal drip for as long as I can remember, but for the last 18 months, I've also had a problem with watery (not itchy) eyes. People often ask why I'm crying. We have two cats, but I'm no worse or better when near them. My doctor gave me a nasal spray and I've taken allergy medicine, but nothing's helped and my eyes water all the time now. Ideas?



If watery eyes are due to an allergic reaction, there typically are additional clues pointing to that cause, such as a seasonal pattern, an association with triggers such as pollen, perfume, and pet dander, and symptoms such as itching, redness, or a gritty sensation in the eyes. (The latter can also be a symptom of dry eye, a condition we'll look at in a moment.) So while eye allergy (also known as allergic conjunctivitis) is on the list of possible suspects, it's nowhere near the top if all you have is watery eyes. "In this particular case, I think it's highly unlikely to be an allergy," says Dr. Anne Ellis, a professor of medicine and the chair of the Division of Allergy at Queen's University in Kingston, ON.

Based on your letter, the problem is far more likely to be eye-related, so the next logical step is to have your eyes examined. Ask your primary-care provider for a referral to an eye specialist or consult an optometrist. Since you live in Ontario and you're over 65, your provincial health insurance plan covers an annual eye exam. (Many, but not all, other provinces also cover periodic exams at age 64 or 65 and up. To find out what the policy is in your home province, go to [opto.ca](http://opto.ca) and search for "provincial grid.")

A comprehensive history and exam can zero in on eye-specific culprits. For example, runny eyes can result from sagging skin pulling on the eyelids, notes Kirsten North, an Ottawa optometrist and consultant in professional practice and health policy with the Canadian Association of Optometrists. "As you get older, your skin gets looser and that can cause watering," she explains. However, it's

more likely that, as paradoxical as it sounds, the problem is actually that your eyes are too dry and your tear ducts have gone into overdrive in an effort to keep them moist. "That's a conversation I have with people every day," North says.

Called dry eye, this condition affects up to 30 per cent of Canadians, and it can be due to a constellation of factors, such as certain medications (antihistamines are one example) and a decline in production of the protective oil that prevents tears from evaporating too quickly. An eye exam can also help get to the bottom of what's causing dry eye.

Based on the underlying problem, your optometrist or ophthalmologist can recommend treatments to help improve symptoms—such as artificial tears containing oil to compensate for a shortfall—along with instructions on using them effectively. (For example, artificial tears need to be applied proactively and regularly for optimal effect.)

That's just one of the reasons you really should consult your eye-care professional before dosing yourself with over-the-counter products; different artificial tears are tailored to specific problems, and some eye drops can actually exacerbate dry eye. What's more, an eye exam can reveal signs of ocular allergy; if that's the problem, your eye-care professional can recommend treatments for it, too.

For more information on managing dry eye, visit:

[opto.ca](http://opto.ca)  
[sjogrenscanada.org](http://sjogrenscanada.org)  
[goodtimes.ca/living-with-dry-eye](http://goodtimes.ca/living-with-dry-eye) ■



Unfortunately, we can answer only those letters selected for publication.

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