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Eye for protection

By Jessica Centers, Jun 1, 2008 12:00 PM

Your eyes may or may not be the window to your soul, but they certainly say a lot about your health. Dry, red, and puffy eyes can make you look tired — even sick — and can age you faster than any amount of makeup can mask. “Really, the things that bother people's eyes the most tend to be external influences like indoor air pollution or dry air,” says Paul Anderson, ND, of Bastyr University in Kenmore, Washington. Although it's not always possible to change the environments where you work and live, experts say these simple tweaks can keep your eyes looking and feeling healthy.

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dryness

PROBLEM: “People don't realize how much you don't blink when you're staring at a computer screen,” Anderson says. That's a big problem when you consider that blinking is how you keep your eyes moist.

SOLUTION: Blinking is the easiest way to keep eyes from drying out. Remember to close

your eyes and take breaks from the computer every 45-60 minutes, for at least two or three minutes. Some dryness, however, is a result of tears not being as full of lubricating chemicals as they should be. "Tears seem like water to us, but they're really a complicated mixture of fatty acids and proteins that form an immune barrier to the outside world," Anderson says. He recommends eating fish rich in omega-3 fatty acids, such as wild Atlantic salmon and sardines, or taking a fish-oil supplement (1,000 mg) once a day. Over-the-counter artificial tears, which contain saline and proteins to stimulate tears, are a simple fix that can be used as often as needed, says Mitchell H. Friedlaender, MD, an ophthalmologist in La Jolla, California. Although the preservatives used in eyedrops are safe, says Friedlaender, ones with benzalkonium chloride can cause eye irritation in people who wear contacts or use drops frequently.

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Boiron Optique 1; Prima Vu Herbal Eye Drops

redness

PROBLEM: "Redness simply means irritation and there are dozens of causes," says Roy S. Rubinfeld, MD, an ophthalmologist in Chevy Chase, Maryland. "The treatment depends on the problem. If your eyes are chronically red, get evaluated by an ophthalmologist to rule out infection." Anything from dryness to allergies may cause redness, but blepharitis — a low-grade inflammation caused by excess oil, dandruff, and staph bacteria on the eyelids — is often to blame, says Rubinfeld.

SOLUTION: If blepharitis is the culprit, "Clean the lids and lashes with baby shampoo, and rinse off with a washcloth and warm water," he says. "Getting off all the eye makeup, oil, and dandruff usually makes the eyes whiter and brighter." Anderson also recommends removing makeup with a cotton ball dabbed in cleansing vitamin E oil.

If you suspect allergies are at the root of the redness, soothe eyes by covering them for five to ten minutes with a cold, wet washcloth. Supplementing with B12 (1,000 mcg) and bioflavonoid (1,000-3,000 mg) during allergy season may also lower allergic response in general.

Irritation from dirty or overused contact lenses can also make eyes look red and inflamed. "People forget that contact lenses are medical devices that put stress on the eyes," Rubinfeld says. "If they feel uncomfortable, take them out." But don't get in the Visine habit. Eyedrops that constrict blood vessels can have a rebound effect similar to nose sprays, he says. "Use them and a few hours later, you need more. Eyes get redder and redder over time, especially with frequent use."

PRODUCT PICKS

Pure & Basic Vitamin E Oil; Dr. Hauschka Eye Solace

circles, bags, and wrinkles

PROBLEM: “As we age, the skin under the eyes loses its elasticity and is more likely to be thinner,” says Amy Derick, MD, a dermatologist in Barrington, Illinois. As a result, the blood vessels become more visible and look bluish. At the same time, less collagen makes the skin rough and bumpy, and seasonal allergies and fluid retention cause puffiness, or bags.

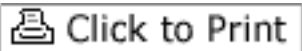
SOLUTION: To prevent water retention around the eyes, Derick recommends limiting salt intake to 1,500 mg per day and using creams that contain caffeine, a vasoconstrictor that shrinks blood vessels so they retain less fluid. “Caffeine promotes drainage under the eyes so they look less puffy,” she says. Similarly, creams that contain vitamin K have been shown to aid clotting and reduce the appearance of dark circles caused by broken blood vessels. Applying a cold compress for about ten minutes each morning can also help constrict blood vessels and drain fluid from around the eyes. And at night apply a vitamin A cream to help stimulate collagen and make wrinkles less apparent. Also try sleeping with your head propped up on a couple of pillows to increase drainage, says Derick.

PRODUCT PICKS

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