

# Fast Facts: Chronic GVHD of the Eyes

**Learning more about graft-versus-host disease (GVHD) can help you make informed decisions and manage symptoms.**

## This fact sheet tells you:

- What chronic GVHD of the eye is
- How to ease symptoms
- How it can be treated
- When to call your doctor

## What is chronic GVHD of the eyes?

Chronic GVHD of the eye happens when the donor's cells attack the surface of your eyes, including the conjunctiva and tear glands. The conjunctiva is the clear tissue that covers the white part of your eye and the inside of your eyelids. Tear glands make tears that keep your eye surface moist and smooth.

First, the conjunctiva and tear glands get inflamed (red, swollen and painful with discharge). Then the damaged glands stop making tears, causing dry eyes. When this happens, your eyes may feel itchy, gritty, painful, sticky and your vision blurry and glary.

Later the conjunctiva and tear glands may become scarred and damaged. When this happens, your eye can't make enough tears to keep your eyes moist and smooth. Your eyes may become very irritated and painful.

## How can I decrease symptoms?

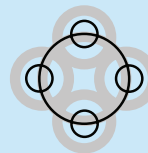
- Keep your eyes moist with lubricating eye drops to reduce dryness and to avoid damage to your eyes. Lubricating or artificial tear drops are available over the counter without prescription. Non-preserved eye drops are best because some preservatives in eye drops may irritate your eyes if used too often.

- Keep away from blowers, fans and blowing wind that can dry your eyes. Wear Air Shields or protective sun glasses with ultraviolet light protection when you go out of doors for UV and wind protection.
- To keep your eyes moist while you sleep, use eye gel or ointment at night. This is especially important if you don't close your eyes completely when you sleep.
- Take flaxseed oil. Mix 2 tablespoons with your juice or food every day. You may also use Omega-3 fatty acid pills instead.

## What treatments are available?

- An ophthalmologist can prescribe medicated eye drops to protect your eyes. These drops help reduce and reverse damage. They include cyclosporine, tacrolimus, lifitegrast and steroid eye drops.

The information in this fact sheet was developed jointly by NMDP<sup>SM</sup> and the Chronic Graft Versus Host Disease Consortium.



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- Sometimes, prescription pills (for example, cevimeline or pilocarpine) help your undamaged tear glands make more tears.
- Punctal plugs block the tiny tubes that drain your tears from your eyes. This makes your tears last longer. Punctal plugs can be temporary or permanent.

- Autologous serum eye drops are special eye drops made from your own blood by a specialized pharmacy. The liquid portion of your blood is separated out and sterilized and put into vials for you to put in your eyes like eye drops. The liquid part of your blood contains a lot of nutrients, antibodies, hormones and proteins that help the eye heal.
- Special bandage contact lenses, PROSE or other scleral lenses may help relieve eye pain and protect the eye from damage from dryness. Ask your eye doctor (ophthalmologist or optometrist) or transplant doctor if these could be an option for you. They however, may be costly and need a special fitting process.

Ask your doctor or pharmacist if any of your other medicines could be making your dry eyes worse. Some pain medicines, antihistamines, antidepressants, and sleeping pills, may cause dry eyes.

### What else should I know?

- Chronic GVHD of the eye often gets better with treatment over time.
- Severe dry eyes, if untreated, may become permanent.
- Vision is usually not affected permanently unless the surface of the eye is very damaged.
- Sometimes eyesight is blurry because of dry eyes and irritation. This gets better when the eye is treated properly and lubricated.
- Chronic GVHD does not usually affect the inner eye structures responsible for vision. However, side effects from medicines to treat GVHD, such as steroids, may cause cataracts or glaucoma. These can be treated by an ophthalmologist.

### When should I call my doctor?

- Your eyes get more dry
- Your eyes hurt
- Your vision changes

### Resources for you

- For information and help coping with GVHD, contact a BMT Patient Navigator at 1 (888) 999-6743.
- For help finding and joining GVHD clinical trials, contact a Clinical Trials Navigator at 1 (888) 814-8610.



### At every step, we're here to help

NMDP has a team dedicated to providing information and support to you before, during, and after transplant. You can contact our Patient Support Center to ask questions you may have about transplant, request professional or peer support, or receive free patient education materials.

**Call:** 1 (888) 999-6743

**Email:** [patientinfo@nmdp.org](mailto:patientinfo@nmdp.org)

**Web:** [nmdp.org/one-on-one](https://www.nmdp.org/one-on-one)



Every individual's medical situation: transplant experience, and recovery is unique. You should always consult with your own transplant team or family doctor regarding your situation. This information is not intended to replace, and should not replace, a doctor's medical judgment or advice.