

Ask the Doctor: Your Questions Answered

"What are the advances in treating corneal disease?"

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While this is a very broad topic, we can focus on the impact that dry eyes has on the cornea (the clear "cap" over the colored part of our eye). Corneal health impacts dry eyes and conversely, dry eyes can cause injury, damage, or instability of the cornea.

An unstable tear film (common with Sjögren's patients) can adversely affect the surface of the eyes and vice versa. The cornea can swell, which may cause blur, fluctuations and/or haziness of vision. With an inadequate tear film, the cornea also loses some of its protective barrier from the environment, so patients may experience irritation and increased susceptibility to allergies and infections. Therefore, while the overall topic about corneal disease is expansive and treatments can vary depending upon the source of the corneal problem, Sjögren's patients can help to treat corneal issues by having the underlying dry eye problems addressed.

When the cornea is involved with dry eye problems, sometimes treatment is needed first to get the resultant inflammation under control. This could involve lubricating drops, eye masks, cool compresses, allergy eye drops, and/or steroid eye drops. While steroids have potential side effects (some people experience increases in eye pressure and prolonged use can increase cataract development and decrease protection from infection), short-term treatment can be safe and effective to reduce inflammation that often accompanies corneal involvement from dry eyes.

An ongoing and inadequate tear film can lead to corneal inflammation and, potentially, damage. There are some options that can help to create a healthier corneal surface. For example, amniotic tissue has been used for wound healing for a long time, and for the eyes, can help with healing from injuries and ulcers. In recent years, it has been effectively used with dry eye patients, particularly those with Sjögren's disease. In one form, a disk which holds the amniotic tissue is placed on the eye for several days, restoring the corneal surface. "Prokera" is the leading product used for this treatment, but a number of other forms are on the market. There is a liquid form called "Regener-Eyes," which your doctor can prescribe that will provide these restorative cells.

One of the effects of long-term corneal inflammation (e.g. from chronic dry eyes) is that nerve sensitivity decreases. While this might help to reduce the discomfort associated with dry eyes, it also neutralizes the nerve pathway that tells the brain to tell the eyes to produce more tears. There is a 6-week eyedrop treatment called "Oxervate" that helps to restore this nerve pathway so that they messaging to produce new tears can continue. Getting approval for this treatment takes some time and cooperation with your eye doctor, but the treatment can be effective and long-lasting. A new treatment on the market is called "Tyrvaya," which is a nasal spray that provides another way to stimulate this nerve pathway. This is the same premise as another treatment device that came on the market a few years ago called "TrueTear."

The ability to increase tear production can also assist in maintaining corneal health. There are now three U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)