

OPHTHALMOLOGY

Bring on the tears!

We often try to hold back these salty droplets associated with sadness, happiness and relief, not realising what an important function they play in our health.



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They're rich in proteins and are anti-bacterial; they lubricate, nourish and protect the eyes from irritants like smoke and wind. They can also secrete endorphins and natural painkillers too.

They are tears, formed by the tear glands that are found under the upper eyelid area. They usually drain via tear ducts which are found in the inner corner of the eyes. Two tiny openings – one in the upper inner corner of the eyelid, and the other in the lower inner corner of the eyelid – connect to the tear duct which is housed in a bony canal at the side of the nose.

These tear ducts function as a “drainage pipe” to drain excess tears and debris from the eyes and into the nose.

Keeping tear ducts healthy

Daily lid hygiene to remove dirt and oil that accumulates around the eyelashes is useful in reducing the amount of debris that filters into the tear ducts. This is especially important for women who wear eye make-up

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like mascara and eyeliner. The tiny particles from the eye make-up and residual make-up left on the eyelids can sometimes lead to clogging of the tear ducts with debris, and potential bacterial infections.

Tear duct infections

The most common type of infections result from the bacteria commonly found on our skin. Should the tear duct be blocked – either from narrowing of the passage with age or other reasons – tears will accumulate in the sac that connects the tear duct openings to the tear duct. This results in stagnation of the

tears and distension of the sac. The result? Bacterial infection of the mucus that collects in the sac and tear duct area.


These bacterial infections can be severe and appear as a red, painful lump in the inner corner of the lower eyelid. If left untreated, they can sometimes progress and spread backwards, via the blood vessels, to structures in the brain. This has potentially blinding or life-threatening consequences in the most severe cases.

What if they don't clear?

Once there is an infection, it usually means that the tear duct is completely blocked. It will need to be treated with antibiotics immediately and may even involve pus that needs to be drained out. These infections can potentially lead to further scarring and compromise of the tear duct system.

Once the infection is cleared or under control, the patients should be advised to undergo elective surgery to bypass the original tear duct system in order to create a new channel for the tears to flow through. Otherwise, the tears will continue to accumulate above the blocked tear duct and cause troublesome symptoms of persistent tearing and discharge as well as recurrent, chronic infections.

Treatment options

Once the tear duct is completely blocked, surgical bypass of the tear duct is usually the only way to solve the problem. This surgery can either be performed using a scope via the nose or externally through a small wound just adjacent to the inner corner of the eye. These can be performed under local or general anaesthesia. 

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