

# What Is Sjögren's Syndrome?

*Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public*

Sjögren's (SHOW-grins) syndrome is a disease that affects the glands that make moisture. It most often causes dryness in the mouth and eyes. It can also lead to dryness in other places that need moisture, such as the nose, throat, and skin.

## Who Gets Sjögren's Syndrome?

Most people with Sjögren's syndrome are women. It can occur at any age and in any race. But it is rare in children and most often shows up after age 40.

## What Causes Sjögren's Syndrome?

Sjögren's syndrome is an autoimmune disease. The immune system is supposed to fight disease by killing off harmful viruses and bacteria. But with autoimmune diseases, your immune system attacks parts of your own body by mistake.

In Sjögren's syndrome, your immune system attacks the glands that make tears and saliva (spit). The damage keeps these glands from working right and causes dry eyes and dry mouth.

Doctors don't know the exact cause of Sjögren's syndrome. They think it may be caused by a combination of two things:

- Genes
- Exposure to something like a virus or bacteria.

## What Are the Symptoms of Sjögren's Syndrome?

The main symptoms are:

- Dry eyes
- Dry mouth.

Sjögren's syndrome also can affect other parts of the body, including the skin, joints, lungs, kidneys, blood vessels, digestive organs, and nerves. Symptoms can include:

- Dry skin
- Skin rashes
- Thyroid problems
- Joint and muscle pain
- Pneumonia

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- Vaginal dryness
- Numbness and tingling in the arms and legs.

Sjögren's can also make you very tired.

## How Is Sjögren's Syndrome Diagnosed?

Doctors use a few ways to diagnose Sjögren's:

- Medical history
- Physical exam
- Certain eye and mouth tests
- Blood tests.

Doctors may also use:

- A urine test
- A chest x ray.

## How Is Sjögren's Syndrome Treated?

Treatment differs for each person. It depends on what parts of the body are affected. Treatment will focus on getting rid of symptoms. Treatment may include:

- Medicines for joint or muscle pain (such as aspirin and ibuprofen)
- Medicines that help you make more saliva and mucus
- Medicines that suppress the immune system.

Treatment for dry eyes may include:

- Artificial tears that come in different thicknesses. You may have to try a few to find the right one.
- Eye ointments. These are thicker than artificial tears. They protect the eyes and keep them wet for several hours. They can blur your vision, so you may want to use them while you sleep.
- A chemical that wets the surface of the eye and keeps the natural tears from drying out so fast. It comes in a small pellet that you put in your lower eyelid. When you add eye drops, the pellet melts. This forms a film over your own tears and traps the moisture.
- Surgery to shut the tear ducts that drain tears from the eye.

Treatment for dry mouth may include:

- Chewing gum or sucking on hard candy helps your glands make more saliva. Sugar-free gum and candy are best.
- Sipping water or a sugar-free drink often to wet your mouth.
- Using oil or petroleum-based lip balm or lipstick to help dry, cracked lips feel better.
- Using a mouth rinse, ointment, or gel prescribed by a doctor to help control pain and swelling.

- Using a saliva substitute prescribed by a doctor to make the mouth feel wet.

People with dry mouth can easily get mouth infections. Tell your doctor if you have white patches or red, burning areas in your mouth.

### Medicines and Dryness

Some medicines can cause eye and mouth dryness. If you are taking one of the drugs listed below, ask your doctor whether you should stop.

Drugs that can cause dryness include:

- Those used for allergies and colds (antihistamines and decongestants)
- Those used to lower fluids (diuretics)
- Some used to treat diarrhea
- Some used to treat blood pressure
- Some antipsychotic medicines
- Tranquilizers
- Antidepressants.

### What Research Is Being Done on Sjögren's Syndrome?

Studies are being done on:

- Genes and gene therapy
- Bacteria and viruses
- The immune system
- Hormones
- Medicines that help the glands make moisture
- Medicines to help the immune system and reduce swelling.

### For More Information About Sjögren's Syndrome and Other Related Conditions:

#### **National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS)**

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The information in this publication was summarized in easy-to-read format from information in a more detailed NIAMS publication. To order the Sjögren's Syndrome Q&A full-text version, please contact NIAMS using the contact information above. To view the complete text or to order online, visit <http://www.niams.nih.gov>.

### **For Your Information**

This publication contains information about medications used to treat the health condition discussed here. When this publication was printed, we included the most up-to-date (accurate) information available. Occasionally, new information on medication is released.

For updates and for any questions about any medications you are taking, please contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration at 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332, a toll-free call) or visit their Web site at [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov).