

What You Should Know About Swimming and Your Eyes

Written By: Kierstan Boyd

Whether you enjoy a leisurely dip in a hotel pool or compete in the Olympic 200 meter freestyle, you may be familiar with the stinging, burning and redness of “swimmer’s eye.” While swimming is a great form of exercise and a relaxing way to cool down, it can be hard on your eyes.

Pools are Tough on the Tear Film

A thin layer of tears called the tear film coats the surface of our eyes. This tear film keeps our eyes moist, smooth and clear. Chlorine and other chemicals used to keep pool water clean can wash away the moist layer of tear film, leaving eyes uncomfortable and red.

People who swim frequently may develop dry eye, where they don’t produce enough tears or the right quality of tears. It can feel like they have grit in their eyes, or their vision becomes blurry.

Without the protection of a fully functioning tear film, eyes are exposed to harmful pool chemicals and lingering bacteria. Chlorine itself can cause a reaction, leaving the surface and edges of your eyes red, itchy, watery and uncomfortable. And bacteria that survive the chlorine can lead to an eye infection, such as pink eye (conjunctivitis).

Protect Those Peepers

Here are 5 ways to keep your eyes healthy while swimming.

Wear Goggles

Wear a pair of swim goggles every time you swim. Goggles keep pool chemicals out of your eyes, helping to keep your tear film healthy.

Wash Your Eyes

Splash your closed eyes with fresh water immediately after swimming. This washes chlorine and other chemicals off your eyelids and eyelashes.

Use Eye Drops...

Use over-the-counter lubricating eye drops before and after swimming to keep the tear film balanced and eyes comfortable.

...or Use Gel Tears

Got dry eye? Help protect your tear film by putting in thicker artificial tears—called gel tears—before putting on your goggles. Check with your ophthalmologist to see about prescription eye drops as well.

Stay Hydrated

Don’t forget to drink plenty of water. Staying well hydrated is an important part of keeping your

eyes moist and comfortable.

Beware of swimming with contact lenses!

Wearing contact lenses in any type of water—including a pool, hot tub, ocean or lake—puts you at high risk for a corneal infection. Bacteria can grow on the lenses even after just one swim.

Because contact lenses sit in the eyes for an extended period of time, your eyes are continuously exposed to chemicals, bacteria, fungi or parasites. That can lead to a painful infection, corneal damage, and even loss of vision.

When swimming, skip the contacts altogether. You can get prescription swimming goggles to help keep your vision clear and eyes healthy in the pool. Talk with your eye care provider for more information about the different kinds of swim goggles available.

Is there something fishy going on with your eyes?

If you have any of these eye infection symptoms, see your eye doctor right away.

Redness

Pain

Tearing

Being very sensitive to light

Blurry vision

Sensation of having something in your eye

Discharge from your eye

Eye swelling