



Sjögren's syndrome

- Sjögren's syndrome affects the glands in your body that make moisture
- It most often causes dryness in the eyes and mouth
- There's no cure, but it can be managed

Sjögren's syndrome is an autoimmune condition. That means it occurs as a result of a faulty immune system.

Your immune system is designed to identify foreign bodies (e.g. bacteria, viruses) and attack them to keep you healthy. However in the case of Sjögren's syndrome your immune system attacks the glands in your body that make moisture (e.g. tears, saliva). This prevents the glands from working properly and causes dryness of the eyes, mouth or other tissues.

Symptoms can be mild, moderate or severe, and the way it progresses is often unpredictable.

There's no cure for Sjögren's syndrome, but it can be managed effectively.

Cause

We don't know what causes Sjögren's syndrome. It appears that your genes may play a role, combined with an outside trigger such as a bacteria or virus.

It's also more likely to affect people who have conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, scleroderma and lupus.

Symptoms

The most common symptoms are:

- dry eyes (irritation, feeling gritty or itchy, burning)
- dry mouth (difficulty chewing or swallowing).

Other areas can be affected

Sjögren's syndrome is a systemic condition, which means it can affect your whole body. Other symptoms can include:

- swelling and tenderness of the glands around your face, neck, armpits and groin
- tiredness (fatigue)
- dry skin or rashes

- joint pain and general achiness
- dryness of the nose, ear and throat
- vaginal dryness
- bowel irritation.

Complications can include:

- increased risk of dental decay
- increased risk of developing thrush infections in the mouth.
- vision problems
- inflammation of internal organs (e.g. kidneys, lungs, liver)
- problems with the circulatory and nervous system.

Diagnosis

It can be difficult to diagnose Sjögren's syndrome as there are many conditions that have similar symptoms.

Dry mouth and eyes can also be the side effects of medications for other problems, such as depression and high blood pressure.

Diagnosing may involve a number of tests including:

- blood tests – may be used to check the levels of particular immune system cells in your blood, and to check for any problems with your kidneys or liver
- a Schirmer's test – special blotting paper is held to eye to measure tear production
- eye examination – including the use of special dyes
- biopsy – a small piece of salivary gland tissue is removed (usually from the lip) and examined under a microscope.

Treatment

While there's no cure for Sjögren's syndrome, it can be managed effectively.

Treatment may include:

- artificial tears and lubricating ointments for the eyes
- artificial saliva
- mouth rinses and lozenges
- nasal sprays
- vaginal lubricants
- moisturising lotion for the skin
- non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) – these medications, help control inflammation and provide temporary pain relief
- corticosteroid medications – may be used as a temporary treatment for joint pain
- immunosuppressive medications - may be used to help control your overactive immune system.

Self-management

There are many things you can do to manage your condition including:

- avoid dry and dusty environments
- avoid air drafts or windy weather
- wear protective glasses when outside in the wind and sun
- sip water regularly or suck ice cubes
- avoid strong soaps that may dry your skin out
- try to increase the humidity in your home
- eat soft, moist foods if you have trouble swallowing
- eat smaller, more frequent meals to stimulate saliva flow
- use warm (not hot) water when taking a shower or bath
- chew sugarless gum to stimulate saliva
- avoid salty, acidic or spicy foods and carbonated drinks that may be painful if your mouth is dry
- practice good dental hygiene and visit your dentist often
- exercise regularly, eat a healthy diet, stop smoking and reduce stress to help your overall health and wellbeing.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Rheumatologist
- Ophthalmologist (eye doctor)
- Musculoskeletal Australia
www.msk.org.au
MSK Help Line: 1800 263 265

How we can help

Call our MSK Help Line and speak to our nurses. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au.

We can help you find out more about:

- Sjögren's syndrome and musculoskeletal conditions
- ways to live well with these conditions
- managing your pain
- upcoming webinars, seminars and other events.

More to explore

- Better Health Channel
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Sjögren's Syndrome Foundation (USA)
www.Sjogrens.org
- Versus Arthritis <https://www.versusarthritis.org>

The whole or part of this material is copyright to the State of Victoria and the Better Health Channel. Reproduced with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Users are permitted to print copies for research, study or educational purposes.

This information has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Musculoskeletal Australia.

May 2019