



Sjögren's disease

Your questions answered

Q. What is Sjögren's disease?

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

Your immune system is designed to look out for and attack foreign bodies – like bacteria and viruses – that can make you sick. For reasons we don't fully understand, your immune system gets confused when you have Sjögren's disease. It targets 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 how it progresses is often unpredictable.

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

Q. What causes Sjögren's disease?

A. We don't know what causes Sjögren's disease. 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 with conditions such as [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [scleroderma](#) and [lupus](#).

Q. What are the symptoms?

A. The most common symptoms are:

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

Sjögren's disease 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 systems.

Q. How is it diagnosed?

A. It can be difficult to diagnose Sjögren's disease, as conditions have similar symptoms.

Dry mouth and eyes can also be the side effects of medicines 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 the 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.

Q. How is Sjögren's disease treated?

A. There's no cure for Sjögren's disease; however, your symptoms can be effectively managed. Treatments include:

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

Q. What else can I do to control my symptoms?

A. There are many things you can do, including:

- learning more about Sjögren's disease
- avoiding dry and dusty environments
- avoiding air drafts or windy weather
- wearing protective glasses when outside in the wind and sun
- sipping water regularly or sucking ice cubes
- avoiding strong soaps that may dry your skin out
- trying to increase the humidity in your home
- eating soft, moist foods if you have trouble swallowing
- eating smaller, more frequent meals to stimulate saliva flow
- using warm (not hot) water when taking a shower or bath
- chewing sugarless gum to stimulate saliva
- avoiding salty, acidic or spicy foods and carbonated drinks that may be painful if your mouth is dry
- practising good dental hygiene and visiting your dentist regularly
- [exercising regularly](#), [eating a healthy diet](#), [quitting smoking](#) and reducing stress to help your overall health and wellbeing.

Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your musculoskeletal condition. They include:

- your doctor
- your rheumatologist
- ophthalmologist
- Musculoskeletal Health Australia | muscha.org | Back Pain | Arthritis | Musculoskeletal Conditions [BAM] Helpline: 1800 263 265

Q. How can Musculoskeletal Health Australia help?

A. Our friendly team are available for you to speak with about Sjögren's disease, pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@muscha.org. We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](#).

More to explore

- [Patient education: Sjögren's disease \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)
UpToDate
- [Sjögren's disease](#)
American College of Rheumatology
- [Sjögren's disease](#)
Arthritis Foundation
- [Sjögren's disease](#)
The Garvan Institute of Medical Research
- [Sjögren's disease](#)
Versus Arthritis
- [Sjögren's Australia](#)

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Updated July 2025

