

Mild winter brings flurry of dry eye problems

The unseasonably warm winter caused a record number of people to suffer from dry eye syndrome along the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

"We are seeing a great deal of dry eye – much, much more than usual. The number of patients having problems from it has truly skyrocketed," said Rainna Bahadur, M.D., an ophthalmologist at Eye Associates of the South, which has clinics in Biloxi, Gulfport and Ocean Springs. "The weather must be playing a huge part in this epidemic. We never had a good hard freeze, and the temperatures have been going from hot to cold."

Dry eye syndrome isn't only about dry eyes. It may include eyes that are excessively watery, irritated, itchy, scratchy, red, burning, blurry, gritty, have mucus, or feel as if something is

in them, Bahadur said.

"Dry eye syndrome can be caused by eyes that do not produce enough tears or by tears that don't have the proper chemical balance," she explained. As many as 25 percent of U.S. adults may have dry eye syndrome, even during normal weather.

The mild winter left pollen, mold spores and other allergens airborne that usually are long gone by springtime. In most winters, they are killed by extended freezes and washed off of trees by deep snowfall. Since these irritants are more concentrated than usual and wind patterns carry them across the country, they exacerbate dry eye problems, according to various health and meteorological sources. Thus, conditions for dry eye should be worse this spring.

Biloxi attorney Edward Donovan's dry eye problems seem to be compounded by the weather, so he went to Dr. Bahadur for relief. Dr. Bahadur gave him the first dry eye test he ever had in a 2010 routine eye exam – then tested him again recently. He said his dry eye problem seemed to worsen due to "the high allergen count – and the fact we've had a warmer than normal winter."

His most recent test showed, "my dry eye problem was more severe and my test scores were lower," he added.

Now, he is "real happy with the treatment" administered by Bahadur, which included starting him on Restasis prescription eye drops.

Bahadur, a specialist in treating dry eyes from her corneal fellowship training, said many of her patients began suffering from dry eye for the first time this winter. Others have had mild dry eye symptoms for years, but recent increased symptoms have caused them to seek medical treatment. She also is getting dry eye complaints from more male patients, who historically are less likely to seek medical help than women.

Treatments for dry eyes vary according to severity level. For many, it's not enough to simply use artificial tears for relief; the underlying cause of the dry eye should be addressed and treated properly, Bahadur said.

Dry eye syndrome also can be "a huge quality of life issue," Bahadur added. Some patients feel overall tiredness and are not able to complete tasks – such as reading, working on the computer or watching TV for extended time.

There are many causes for dry eye, which is part of the natural aging process. It can be caused by eyelid problems; health problems (lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, thyroid; rosacea); drugs (antihistamines, antidepressants, oral contraceptives); and wind and dust, various ophthalmology sources said.

Donovan, 62, said he learned from Dr. Bahadur that his dry eye problems have "multiple origins or triggers. For me, I have some rosacea. As we age, our tear ducts also do not work as well as they used to," he added. "The other factor is: how well do we take care of ourselves?"

Bahadur added that dry eye syndrome should be treated by a doctor and not be ignored if patients use over-the-counter eye drops several times a day. Medical treatment for dry eye can preserve or improve vision, prevent or minimize structural damage to the eye surface, and improve patient comfort, according to guidelines on the American Academy of Ophthalmology website.

Dry eye can cause disease of the ocular surface and corneal scarring. Severe corneal scarring may necessitate corneal transplants, added Bahadur, a cornea and refractive surgeon who also performs that surgery.

To prevent or control dry eye syndrome, have annual eye exams and see your eye doctor immediately if you notice dry eye symptoms or any decline in your vision, she advised.

Bahadur is a partner in Eye Associates of the South. For more information or for an appointment, call 396-5185 or go to www.2020view.com.