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2026 State of Dry Eye Survey: Understanding the broader impact of dry eye

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Results from the third annual Bausch + Lomb State of Dry Eye survey suggest that dry eye symptoms may affect more than ocular comfort, with respondents reporting impacts on stress or anxiety, productivity, mood, self-confidence and emotional wellbeing.
- Among respondents who said dry eye affected their stress or anxiety, 73% reported improvement in this area after beginning treatment with either a prescription medication or an over-the-counter product.
- Prescription eye drop users were more likely than OTC-only users to report near-total or substantial improvement in several areas, including self-confidence, productivity, emotional wellbeing and mood.
- The survey also identified considerable gaps in awareness of potential associations between dry eye symptoms and menopause, autoimmune conditions and certain co-existing conditions.

Looking beyond the ocular surface

Dry eye is commonly associated with physical symptoms such as dryness, irritation, fluctuating vision and ocular discomfort. However, the effects reported by people living with dry eye may extend into other aspects of daily life.

The third annual Bausch + Lomb *State of Dry Eye* survey explored this broader burden. The online survey was conducted by The Harris Poll from May 4 through May 15, 2026, among 1,000 U.S. adults aged 18 or older who frequently experienced eye dryness or had been diagnosed with dry eye disease by a healthcare professional. All respondents were using either an over-the-counter product or a prescription medication for their dry eye.

The findings provide a patient-centered view of how respondents perceived the relationship between their dry eye symptoms, emotional wellbeing and everyday functioning.

Dry eye can affect multiple aspects of daily life

One in three respondents reported that their dry eye symptoms affected their stress or anxiety level, while nearly three in ten reported effects on productivity and mood. Approximately one in five said dry eye affected their self-confidence or emotional wellbeing.

Reported areas of impact included:

- **Stress or anxiety:** 33%
- **Productivity:** 29%
- **Mood:** 28%
- **Self-confidence:** 22%
- **Emotional wellbeing:** 20%

These results reinforce the importance of looking beyond individual ocular symptoms when discussing dry eye with patients. Questions about work, routine activities, confidence and overall wellbeing may help eye care professionals develop a more complete understanding of the patient experience.

Reported improvements following treatment

The survey also asked respondents who indicated that dry eye affected a particular area of their lives whether that area had improved after they began using a prescription medication or an OTC product.

Among respondents who said their stress or anxiety was affected by dry eye, **73% reported an improvement after beginning treatment.**

Differences were also observed between respondents using prescription eye drops and those using only OTC products:

- **Self-confidence:** 64% of prescription users reported near-total or substantial improvement, compared with 25% of OTC-only users.
- **Productivity:** 60% of prescription users reported improvement, compared with 43% of OTC-only users.
- **Emotional wellbeing:** 59% of prescription users reported improvement, compared with 34% of OTC-only users.
- **Mood:** 52% of prescription users reported improvement, compared with 38% of OTC-only users.

These comparisons should be interpreted with caution. Treatment groups were not randomized, respondents may have differed in disease severity or other characteristics, and the OTC-only respondent base for some comparisons was fewer than 100 people. The findings therefore describe reported experiences within the surveyed population and do not establish comparative treatment effectiveness.

Awareness gaps around associated health factors

Dry eye can be influenced by multiple factors, including age, environment, medications, lifestyle, hormonal changes and co-existing health conditions. The survey suggests that many respondents were not aware of some of these potential associations.

Nine in ten respondents did not know that dry eye symptoms may be associated with menopause. Nearly eight in ten did not know that symptoms could be associated with autoimmune conditions in general.

Awareness of specific potential associations was particularly limited:

- **8%** knew dry eye symptoms may be associated with lupus.
- **8%** knew dry eye symptoms may be associated with type 1 diabetes.
- **7%** knew dry eye symptoms may be associated with rheumatoid arthritis.

These results point to an opportunity for broader patient education. Although dry eye symptoms alone cannot be used to diagnose an underlying systemic condition, a comprehensive medical history and discussion of hormonal changes, medications and co-existing conditions may help inform an appropriate eye care evaluation.

Supporting more comprehensive patient conversations

The survey findings highlight the value of asking patients not only what their eyes feel like, but also how their symptoms affect their daily lives.

Patients may not independently connect dry eye with changes in productivity, confidence, mood or emotional wellbeing. They may also be unaware that hormonal changes or systemic conditions can be relevant to an assessment of their symptoms. Open-ended questions about symptom frequency, duration, triggers, treatment use and daily-life impact can help uncover concerns that may not emerge through a symptom checklist alone.

These conversations can also provide an opportunity to set realistic expectations. Dry eye is a complex, multifactorial condition, and management may require ongoing evaluation and adjustments based on the patient's symptoms, clinical findings, underlying contributors and response to treatment.

Summary

The third annual Bausch + Lomb *State of Dry Eye* survey suggests that people living with dry eye may experience effects extending beyond ocular discomfort. Respondents reported impacts on stress or anxiety, productivity, mood, self-confidence and emotional wellbeing, and many reported improvements in these areas after beginning treatment.

The findings also reveal substantial gaps in awareness of factors that may be associated with dry eye symptoms, including menopause and certain systemic conditions. While the survey cannot establish causality or compare the effectiveness of particular treatments, it offers additional insight into the patient-reported burden of dry eye and supports more comprehensive conversations between patients and eye care professionals.

For additional patient education resources, visit **KnowYourDryEye.com**.

Reference

1. Bausch + Lomb. *State of Dry Eye Survey.* Online survey conducted in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bausch + Lomb among 1,000 U.S. adults aged 18 or older who frequently experienced eye dryness or had been diagnosed with dry eye disease by a healthcare professional. Survey conducted May 4–15, 2026. Complete methodology available from Bausch + Lomb.

Authors' disclosures

Article authored and reviewed by Bausch + Lomb Global Medical and Scientific Affairs. The survey was conducted online in the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of Bausch + Lomb.