

Sjögren Syndrome



Sjögren syndrome is an autoimmune health problem. It's a disease where the body's immune system attacks its own cells and tissues. With Sjögren syndrome, white blood cells fight the glands that make moisture in the body. They mainly attack the tear glands and salivary glands. It most often affects women over age 40.

Types of Sjögren syndrome

Sjögren syndrome has 2 types:

- Primary Sjögren. This is Sjögren syndrome that happens by itself, with no other disease or illness. About 50% of Sjögren syndrome cases are primary Sjögren.
- Secondary Sjögren. This is Sjögren syndrome that happens along with another disease. It most often happens along with other autoimmune health problems. These may be scleroderma, lupus, or rheumatoid arthritis (RA).

What causes Sjögren syndrome?

Researchers are still learning about the cause of Sjögren syndrome. It may be caused by a combination of genes and things in the environment. For example, a virus may trigger the syndrome in a person with a certain gene. You may be more at risk for Sjögren if you have a rheumatic disease. Examples are lupus and RA.

Symptoms of Sjögren syndrome

Symptoms can range from mild to severe. Severe symptoms can affect quality of life. The symptoms can include:

- Dry mouth, which can lead to trouble with talking, chewing, or swallowing
- Dry eyes that can have a gritty or burning feeling
- Dry, peeling lips
- Pain or cracking on the tongue
- Dry or sore throat
- Tooth decay
- Dry skin
- Vaginal dryness
- Dry nose
- Changes in how well you taste or smell
- Tiredness
- Joint pain
- Digestive problems

Diagnosing Sjögren syndrome

Diagnosis may be done by a rheumatologist, primary healthcare provider, or other specialist. A rheumatologist is a healthcare provider who treats rheumatic diseases. These are complex health problems that affect many parts of the body.

Sjögren syndrome is often hard to diagnose. That's because the symptoms can be like those of other health problems. Similar symptoms can be caused by chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS), fibromyalgia, lupus, RA, or multiple sclerosis (MS).

A point-based test is used to see if your symptoms may be from Sjögren syndrome. The more points you have, the more likely it is that you have the disease. You may also have blood tests, eye tests, and dental tests. These are done to take a closer look at eye and mouth symptoms.

Treatment for Sjögren syndrome

There is no cure for Sjögren syndrome. Treatment is done to help ease symptoms.

Eye and mouth symptoms may be treated with over-the-counter (OTC) eye and mouth drops. Your healthcare provider may order stronger medicine if OTC versions don't help. You may also use pain medicine. Punctal occlusion can also be used to decrease ocular dryness. This is a procedure to plug the tear ducts that drain tears from the eyes.

If your symptoms affect your whole body, you will be treated with special medicines. These are called immunosuppressive medicines. They are used to treat autoimmune health problems. Your healthcare provider will tell you more about the risks, benefits, and side effects of these medicines.

Living with Sjögren syndrome

Things you eat and drink may make symptoms of Sjögren syndrome worse. You may want to:

- Not eat foods that are spicy, hard, crunchy, or acidic
- Eat more smooth, soft, and creamy foods such as soups, casseroles, and pasta dishes
- Not eat gluten if you also have celiac disease
- Not drink alcohol
- Eat more foods with omega-3 fatty acids
- Not drink carbonated or acidic drinks
- Drink water to help with dry mouth

You can soothe dry eyes by:

- Putting moist, warm compresses on your eyes
- Using eye lubricants every day
- Using prescription eye gel when you sleep
- Not taking medicines that can dry your eyes, such as antihistamines
- Not sitting near air conditioning or heating vents
- Using a humidifier at home

Mouth dryness can lead to cavities. You can help prevent cavities by:

- Using products that can help create mouth moisture
- Chewing sugarless gum

- Brushing your teeth after each meal
- Flossing your teeth every day
- Getting dental checkups regularly
- Using sugar-free lemon candies to stimulate saliva production

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