

# The impact of COVID-19 on people with dry eye disease

A survey initiated and funded by Santen SA

A survey was conducted to find out the real world impact of the pandemic on people with dry eye disease in a cohort of 502 people in 5 EU countries. Of particular interest was the impact of working remotely and screen time, a known risk factor for dry eye disease.<sup>1</sup> The survey revealed a wealth of valuable insights for all those managing this common condition. This report covers screen time, emotional impact and people's needs following the confinement period.

## Key findings

- 65% increased their screen time during lockdown, spending 29% more time in front of a screen
- 72% said dry eye had had a negative effect on their lives since lockdown, with 18% reporting a *big* negative impact
- 62% who had not seen a doctor said they needed to. This is despite a clear need, with half still suffering, or suffering a worsening of their dry eye symptoms

## Survey objectives

- Impact of COVID-19 on behaviour, including screen time
- Consequences of new behaviours on dry eye symptoms
- Changes in people's eyecare needs

During July 2020, 502 online surveys were completed. All participants suffered from dry eye disease and took treatment for it. At least half in each country were under the care of an ophthalmologist. Questions focused on the first 4 months of the COVID-19 crisis, compared to before the crisis.



## Screen time increased, linked to worsening of dry eye symptoms

Most people increased their screen time during lockdown, spending 29% more time in front of a screen than before lockdown. This was even higher in Italy and Spain. Those who increased screen time were significantly more likely to experience worsening of symptoms compared with those who did not ( $p < 0.05$ ).

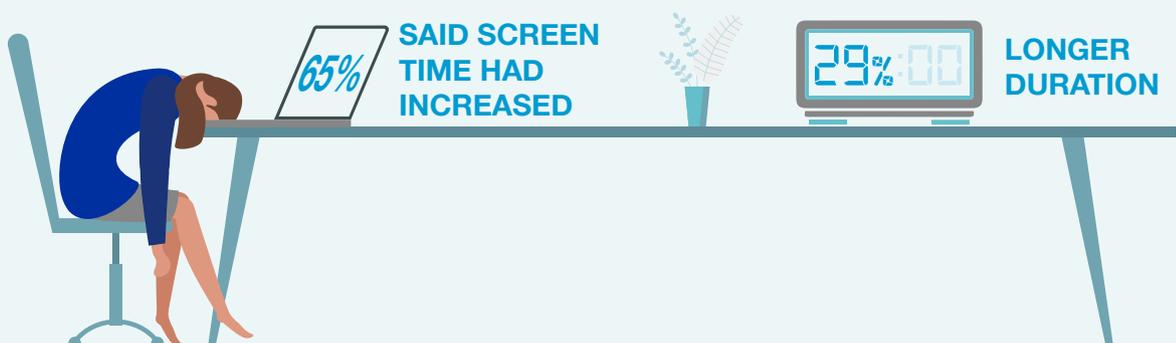
*"It bothers me because I have been looking at screens more than I did before the COVID-19 crisis. For example, the desktop computer screen makes me very uncomfortable."*

– Participant from Spain 🇪🇸

Increased screen time (59%) was the top ranked reason given for worsening or continued dry eye problems. This was followed by stress (50%) and disturbed sleep patterns (43%). The main worsening symptoms were tired eyes (84%), increased dryness, grittiness (67%) and worsening of vision/blurriness (55%).

In those who had increased screen time, the emotional and life impact was significantly greater than those with lower screen time. Higher numbers reported:

- Stress
- Frustration ( $p < 0.05$ )
- Irritability
- Worry/anxiety
- Tiredness
- Feeling depressed



## Dry eye disease had a negative impact on people's daily lives during lockdown

In these difficult times, dry eye problems added to the list of things people had to cope with. Many reported an emotional impact with dry eye causing stress (36%), irritability (36%), tiredness or exhaustion (34%) and frustration (32%). In some, there was a mental health impact with 26% directly attributing worry, or anxiety, to their eye problems and 17% depression.

Dry eye negatively affected many areas of life, including sleep, enjoyment of entertainment, family life, social life, and exercise. 20% said it had given them headaches and 16% had increased pain.

In these turbulent economic times, a worrying 15% said dry eye had reduced their ability to work or slowed them down and 10% reported being unable to work because of their condition. 8% said it had affected their finances.

*“My eyes are redder, they look unhealthy and they make me look tired, I’m embarrassed about that. It’s also painful and tiring to put up with.”*

– Participant from France 

## People are seeking better relief

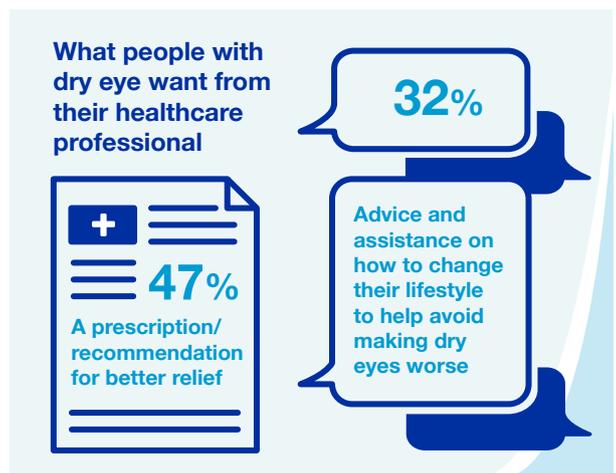
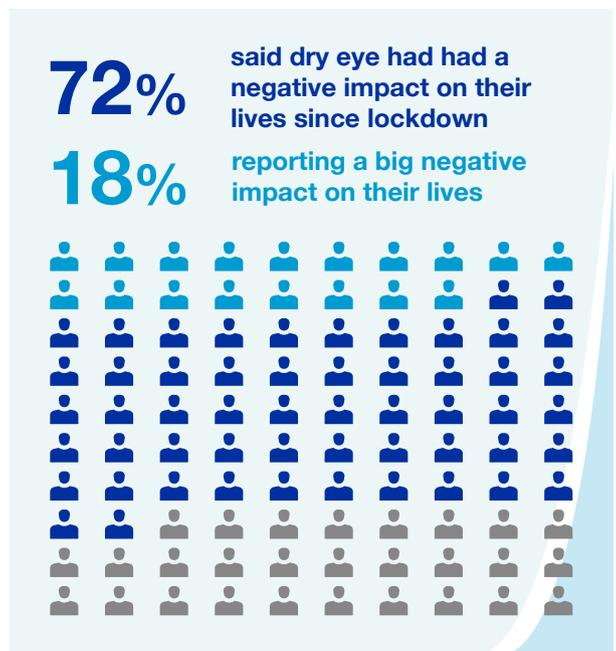
Six out of ten who didn't see a healthcare professional about their dry eye during lockdown said they needed to. The main reason they didn't was fear of catching coronavirus. There was a significant increase in the number who did not pick up their treatment compared with the period prior to lockdown ( $p < 0.05$ ). When people do receive professional care, 47% are seeking better relief, but they also want lifestyle advice so they can help themselves.

*“Good products that are effective long-term”*

– Participant from France 

*“Adequate and targeted prescription.”*

– Participant from Italy 



## Summary

Although sometimes regarded as a trivial condition, this survey shows that the real world impact of dry eye during COVID-19 lockdown has had an important impact on people's lives. This large, 5 country survey of dry eye sufferers shows that the majority have increased their screen time during lockdown. Increased screen time has had a negative impact on their dry eye condition alongside higher stress levels and a lack of sleep. Dry eye has had a clear emotional impact on people, with many reporting feelings of increased stress, tiredness, irritability and frustration as a result of their condition. The majority have had no healthcare professional contact during lockdown. This is despite a clear need, with half still suffering symptoms or having worsening symptoms. There is a real opportunity for ophthalmologists to make a genuine and important difference in the months ahead – especially where high screen usage persists.

For more information on managing dry eye under the new circumstances see this article in The Ophthalmologist by Professor Barabino <https://theophthalmologist.com/covid-19-and-dry-eye-disease>

Provided as a service to ophthalmology by Santen SA

1. Gayton JL. Clin Ophthalmol 2009; 3: 405-12. Date of preparation: August 2020 NP-FOTE-EMEA-0168

