

# “Sjögren’s keep *me* on the sidelines? *No way!*”

TV sportscaster **Jeannine Edwards** shares how she took charge of the autoimmune disorder behind her mysterious symptoms—and why she’ll never ignore her body’s red flags again.

**W**e caught up with ESPN reporter and studio anchor Jeannine Edwards just as she was wrapping up a busy summer. But then again, every summer is a whirlwind when you work for the “go to” source for sports news and there’s always an event or breaking story to cover. Jeannine, 48, had barely caught her breath after reporting on the NBA draft for ESPN’s *SportsCenter* when she was off to interview Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps just days before his record-breaking wins.

And after that? Well, then it was time for preseason NFL football coverage, followed by her weekly gig as a sideline reporter for college football.

Hard to believe that 12 years ago, this broadcasting dynamo was almost sidelined by two seemingly benign symptoms: unrelenting dry eyes alternating with excessive tearing. She had landed her plum job as an ESPN sports-

caster five years before and now vision problems were threatening her livelihood, making it challenging to work outdoors in bad weather and wear the heavy eye make-up necessary for TV reporting. Plus, it was getting harder to spend hours reviewing stats and background material.

Around the same time, Jeannine was also experiencing fatigue and swollen joints but had no reason to suspect they were connected to her eye problems. Initially, she tried to shrug off her symptoms, but then her eyes became so dry and painful that she went to both her eye doctor and general practitioner. “I went back and forth to doctors’ offices but no one could find out what was going on. I finally

## Have RA or lupus? Look out for Sjögren’s too!

If you already have an autoimmune disease like RA or lupus, you are at greater risk of developing Sjögren’s. So if you start experiencing dry eyes or a cottony mouth, alert your doctor. While these symptoms are often easily explained (medications such as antidepressants and antihistamines are common culprits), it’s important to rule out more serious causes. Left untreated, Sjögren’s can lead to complications like tooth decay, oral infections and corneal scratches on the eye, which could result in vision loss. It can also lead to nerve pain and even affect certain organs. The good news? When caught early, the disease can be kept in check with medication and regular eye and dental care.

[COVER story]



Jeannine takes a break on her horse farm in Maryland. A former amateur jockey, it's no surprise the equine lover has covered more than a dozen Triple Crown races.

PHOTOGRAPH  
BY SCOTT LEWIS

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had a procedure to flush my tear ducts because they suspected my horrible dry eyes were the result of a blocked tear duct,” recalls Jeannine.

And that dry, gritty feeling in her eyes wasn’t the only problem: “Ironically, even though they were so dry, my eyes were also tearing a lot, which turned out to be reflex tearing.” Essentially, her tear ducts went into overdrive to make up for the lack of natural oils that normally lubricate the eyes. “All that tearing and dryness left them feeling raw, like the nerves on the surface of my eyes were exposed,” she says.

Eventually, Jeannine was referred to an eye specialist and a rheumatologist for evaluation. After various tests, she was finally diagnosed with Sjögren’s syndrome, an inflammatory disease in which the immune system attacks the moisture-producing glands that make tears and saliva. “I was shocked when the doctor told me,” she remembers. “Not only was it hard to pronounce, I had never even heard of it!”

In fact, Sjögren’s (pronounced SHOW-grins) only recently caught the public’s attention in summer 2011, when the condition forced tennis star Venus Williams to withdraw from the U.S. Open. Although the classic signs of Sjögren’s are severe dryness of the eyes and mouth, Venus cited two other symptoms, joint pain and fatigue, as her reasons for leaving the competition. The disorder usually strikes women over 40.

Fortunately, Jeannine’s only current symptom is extreme dry eyes. “But that’s been enough,” she says. “I’ve tried various medications and regularly use steroid eye-drops. I’ve also had my tear ducts plugged and cauterized to try to prevent moisture evaporation.” Jeannine hasn’t found relief yet, but she continues to work with her doctors and seek out new treatments for autoimmune-related dry eye.

Although her symptoms never interfered with her broadcasting duties, Jeannine kept quiet about her condition for years. “Most people don’t know what it is, so it’s really not something I ever put out there,” she says. But these days, the reporter is opening up about her experience and encouraging others to be proactive about any symptom. “I could have saved myself two years of suffering,” notes Jeannine. “Talking to your doctor at the first sign of a problem is the best way to avoid the agony of dealing with symptoms that could’ve easily been treated.”

—Gina Roberts-Grey

## Bothered by dry, irritated eyes? Try Jeannine’s tips!

- **Shield yourself from bad weather.** Cold, windy days are a challenge. “It’s hard to take the dog for a walk or go out to the barn to see my horses,” she says. Her simple solution? Welder’s glasses! “They’re plastic, wraparound safety glasses that cut the wind when walking your dog or even doing things like gardening.”
- **Give your eyes a bedtime treat.** “At the end of a long workday, my eyes are aching and in need of relief,” says Jeannine, who uses a homemade hot compress that increases oil secretions. “They’re like beanbags that you can warm up in the microwave, and they conform to the eyes much better than a warm washcloth.” To make, just fill a nylon stocking with a cup of uncooked rice, then tie a yarn or ribbon right above the rice.
- **Use the right makeup.** Excessive tearing can cause mascara to smear and run. “That’s not a good look on television!” says Jeannine, who wears waterproof eye makeup and avoids further irritation by using only fragrance-free facial products.
- **Control indoor air.** “My eyes tear even if I’m indoors. It’s much worse in the winter, when the air is dry and cold.” To head off problems, Jeannine runs a humidifier in her house year round. She stays away from fans, too. “I don’t use ceiling fans, and I never, ever blow the heat or air-conditioning through vents that aim toward my face in the car.”

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