



Impact of artificial tear formulation and timing on keratometric measurements in cataract patients with and without dry eye disease: a randomized cross-over study

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ABSTRACT

Background: Accurate keratometric assessment is essential for intraocular lens (IOL) power calculation in cataract surgery. Artificial tears are commonly used to optimize the ocular surface; however, their short-term effects on keratometric and biometric measurements remain uncertain. This study evaluated the impact of artificial tears with different viscosities on keratometry and optical biometry parameters in cataract patients with and without dry eye disease (DED).

Methods: This prospective, randomized cross-over study included 40 cataract patients, comprising 20 with mild-to-moderate DED and 20 with normal ocular surfaces. Each participant received high- and low-viscosity artificial tears on separate visits in randomized order, with a 24-h washout period. Keratometric parameters (K1 and K2), axial length (AL), and anterior chamber depth (ACD) were measured at baseline and at 30 s, 2 min, and 5 min after drop instillation. Calculated IOL power was evaluated at baseline and 5 min.

Results: Participants with DED were significantly older than those with normal ocular surfaces ($P < 0.05$), whereas sex distribution and intraocular pressure were comparable between groups (both $P > 0.05$). Following artificial tear instillation, K1 and K2 measurements showed time-dependent descriptive changes across ocular-surface and formulation conditions. In both DED conditions, the lowest mean K1 value was observed at 30 s. In normal-eye conditions, mean K1 values were similar to baseline at 30 s and increased numerically toward 5 min. K2 measurements showed differing temporal patterns, with the largest numerical fluctuations observed in the DED/high-viscosity condition and smaller changes in the normal-eye/low-viscosity condition. Some descriptive differences remained evident at 5 min. AL and ACD measurements showed broadly similar distributions across conditions and timepoints. Calculated IOL power distributions at baseline and 5 min are presented for each study condition.

Conclusions: Artificial tear instillation was associated with short-term, time-dependent alterations in keratometric measurements, with differing descriptive patterns across ocular-surface and formulation conditions. These findings highlight the importance of timing in optical biometry and suggest that keratometric measurements obtained shortly after artificial tear instillation should be interpreted cautiously. Because some changes remained evident at the 5-min assessment, the optimal waiting interval cannot be determined from these data alone and requires further investigation.

KEYWORDS

cross-over trials, artificial tears, viscosities, biometric analysis, topography, corneal, anterior chambers, eye axial length, intraocular lens implantation, phakic intraocular lens

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How to cite this article: Yousef Elsadek EM, Abdel Hafez YS, Ghoneim EM. Impact of artificial tear formulation and timing on keratometric measurements in cataract patients with and without dry eye disease: a randomized cross-over study. *Med Hypothesis Discov Innov Optom*. 2026 Spring; 7(1): 31-40. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51329/mehdiptometry243>.

Received: 03 February 2026; Accepted: 11 May 2026



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INTRODUCTION

Accurate preoperative biometry is essential for achieving optimal refractive outcomes following cataract surgery, particularly with the rising use of premium intraocular lenses (IOLs), including toric, multifocal, and extended depth-of-focus designs [1, 2]. The cornea contributes approximately two-thirds of the eye's total refractive power, and even minimal inaccuracies in corneal curvature measurements can result in clinically significant postoperative refractive errors [3–5].

Dry eye disease (DED) is a multifactorial ocular surface disorder characterized by tear film instability, hyperosmolarity, inflammation, and neurosensory abnormalities [6, 7]. Its prevalence is notably high among patients undergoing cataract surgery, particularly in older populations [8]. Tear film instability disrupts the smooth optical interface required for reliable keratometric measurements, thereby increasing measurement variability and reducing repeatability [9–11].

Artificial tears are commonly used to optimize ocular surface conditions prior to biometry; however, their formulations vary considerably in viscosity, osmoprotective properties, and tear film residence time. These differences may transiently alter corneal topography and curvature measurements, further compromising the accuracy of keratometric assessments [11–15]. Moreover, artificial tear instillation is shown to induce transient changes in optical quality, which may contribute to short-term variability in ocular measurements [16].

The present study aims to evaluate the impact of artificial tears with different viscosities on keratometric and biometric measurements in cataract patients with and without DED.

METHODS

This prospective, randomized, two-period, two-treatment (2×2) cross-over interventional study was conducted in Egypt at the Department of Ophthalmology, Port Said University and Damietta Ophthalmology Hospital between May and November 2025. Participants were recruited to include individuals with mild-to-moderate DED and an equal number of individuals with clinically normal ocular surfaces. The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Port Said University (ERN: MED (3/11/2024) s.no(199) OPT824_005). All procedures adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to enrollment and before the initiation of any study-related procedures. The trial was prospectively registered with the Pan African Clinical Trials Registry [17].

A sample size calculation was performed using G*Power software (version 3.1; Heinrich Heine University, Dusseldorf, Germany) [18]. Based on a repeated-measures design (within-subject factor: time), assuming a large effect size ($f = 0.40$), a two-sided significance level (α) of 0.05, and a statistical power of 80%, the required sample size was estimated to be 36 participants. To account for potential attrition and measurement-related exclusions, the sample size was increased by approximately 10%, resulting in a final sample of 40 participants.

Participants of both sexes were eligible for inclusion if they were aged 40–70 years and represented a predominantly middle-aged population (ages 45–64). All participants were required to have a diagnosis of nuclear or cortical cataract, classified according to a standardized lens opacification grading system, in the absence of any concomitant intraocular comorbidities. Additional eligibility criteria were intraocular pressure (IOP) ≤ 21 mmHg and axial length (AL) 22–26 mm. Participants were stratified according to ocular surface status into those with mild-to-moderate DED and those with clinically normal ocular surfaces without evidence of DED. Exclusion criteria were any corneal pathology, such as corneal opacity, dystrophy, degeneration, or keratoconus; eyelid abnormalities or a history of ocular trauma; usage of topical ophthalmic medications within 24 hours prior to examination; individuals who required ongoing topical ocular treatment; severe nasal or ocular allergies, active corneal or conjunctival infection, abnormalities of the nasolacrimal drainage system, and severe DED (defined as level-4 severity).

This study was designed as a randomized, two-period, two-treatment (2×2) cross-over clinical trial in accordance with CONSORT recommendations. Participants were randomly assigned to intervention sequences using a simple randomization approach, whereby the allocation sequence was generated using a computer-based randomization table. Allocation concealment was ensured through the use of sequentially numbered, sealed, opaque envelopes that were opened only after participant enrollment to prevent foreknowledge of treatment assignment. Masking was implemented at multiple levels: both participants and care providers administering the interventions were blinded to treatment allocation, thereby minimizing performance and detection bias. Each participant received both interventions in a randomized order with a washout period between treatment periods. Figure 1 presents the CONSORT flow diagram of the trial.

A comprehensive medical and ophthalmic history was obtained from all participants prior to enrollment. Each participant subsequently underwent a standardized ophthalmological examination, including assessment of visual acuity, slit-lamp biomicroscopy of the anterior segment, posterior segment evaluation, intraocular pressure (IOP) measurement, and ocular biometry. Uncorrected distance visual acuity (UCDVA) and best-corrected distance visual acuity (BCDVA) were measured monocularly using a Snellen chart (Topcon Healthcare Solutions, Inc., Tokyo, Japan) and recorded in Snellen notation. The anterior and posterior segments were examined using slit-lamp biomicroscopy, and IOP was measured using a non-contact air-puff tonometer (Topcon Co., Tokyo, Japan).

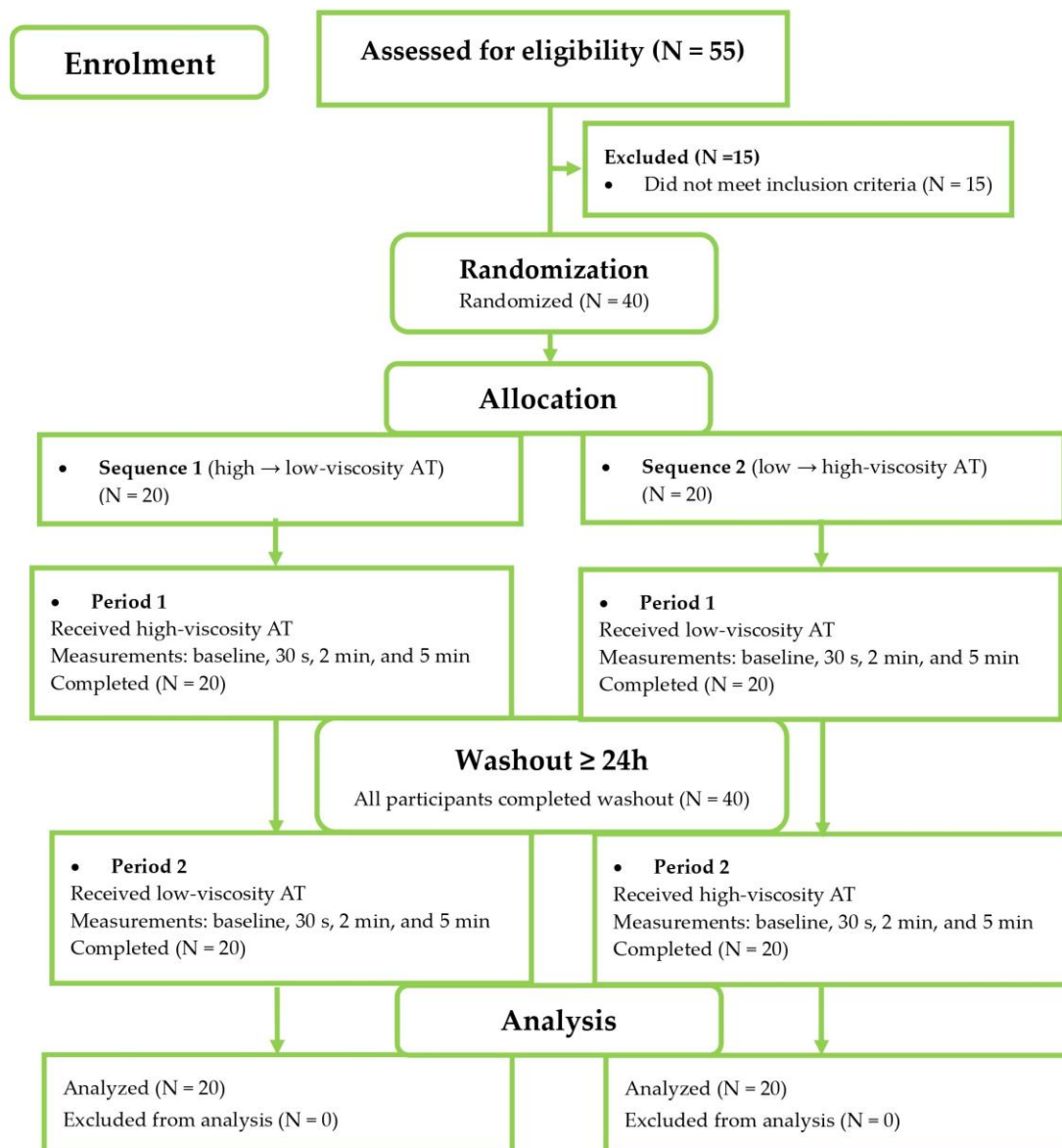


Figure 1. CONSORT flow diagram of participant enrollment, randomization, intervention sequence allocation, and analysis in the cross-over trial. **Note:** This study was designed as a randomized, two-period, two-treatment (2 × 2) cross-over clinical trial, in which each participant received both artificial tear (AT) formulations in a randomized sequence with a washout interval between treatment periods. The high-viscosity formulation consisted of a hyaluronic acid 0.2% ophthalmic solution (Blink™ Intensive Tears; Bausch + Lomb/Johnson & Johnson Vision Care, Inc.), containing polyethylene glycol 400 (PEG 400) 0.25% and sodium hyaluronate 0.2% as a viscosity-enhancing agent to prolong ocular surface residence time. The low-viscosity formulation consisted of a hyaluronic acid 0.15% ophthalmic solution (Systane® Hydration; Alcon Laboratories, Inc., Fort Worth, Texas, USA) containing polyethylene glycol 400, propylene glycol, and sodium hyaluronate 0.15%.

DED was assessed using Schirmer test I and tear film break-up time (TBUT), with reference to established dry-eye diagnostic literature [19, 20]. TBUT was performed first to minimize reflex tearing and ocular surface irritation that could influence subsequent measurements. For TBUT assessment, a fluorescein strip moistened with non-preserved saline was gently applied to the inferior conjunctival sac, taking care to avoid contact with the cornea or eyelashes. Participants were instructed to blink several times to ensure even distribution of the dye, then refrain from blinking while the tear film was being examined under slit-lamp biomicroscopy with cobalt blue illumination. The interval between the last complete blink and the appearance of the first dry spot on the corneal surface was recorded. Measurements were repeated three times, using the mean value for analysis.

A TBUT < 10 s was considered indicative of tear film instability. Schirmer test I was subsequently performed without topical anesthesia to assess both basal and reflex tear secretion. Standardized Schirmer strips were placed at the junction of the middle and lateral third of the lower eyelid (lower fornix), with care taken to avoid corneal contact. Participants were instructed to gently close their eyes during the test. After 5 min, the strips were removed and the length of wetting was measured in millimeters. Values > 10 mm were considered normal, 5–10 mm borderline, and < 5 mm suggestive of aqueous-deficient dry eye. For the purposes of this study, a Schirmer test I value < 10 mm in conjunction with a TBUT < 10 s was used as the operational criterion for DED [21].

Two commercially available artificial tear formulations with differing viscosities were evaluated. Each participant received both formulations in a cross-over manner on separate study visits, with a minimum washout period of 24 hours between administrations. The high-viscosity formulation consisted of a hyaluronic acid 0.2% ophthalmic solution (Blink™ Intensive Tears; Bausch + Lomb/Johnson & Johnson Vision Care, Inc.), containing polyethylene glycol 400 (PEG 400) 0.25% and sodium hyaluronate 0.2% as a viscosity-enhancing agent to prolong ocular surface residence time. The low-viscosity formulation consisted of a hyaluronic acid 0.15% ophthalmic solution (Systane® Hydration; Alcon Laboratories, Inc., Fort Worth, Texas, USA) containing polyethylene glycol 400, propylene glycol, and sodium hyaluronate 0.15%. In both intervention conditions, a single drop was instilled into the inferior conjunctival sac of the study eye at each visit. These formulations were selected based on their widespread clinical use and their differing rheological properties, which are expected to influence precorneal retention and tear film stability [22].

Ocular biometry parameters, including AL, flat keratometry (K_1), steep keratometry (K_2), and anterior chamber depth (ACD), were obtained using an optical low-coherence interferometry device (Aladdin® biometer, Topcon Corp., Tokyo, Japan). IOL power calculations were performed based on AL, employing the Holladay 1 formula for eyes with AL between 22.0 and 24.5 mm and the SRK/T formula for eyes with AL between 24.6 and 26.0 mm. Measurements were obtained at baseline and at 30 s, 2 min, and 5 min following drop instillation. To minimize tear film-related variability, participants were instructed to blink normally immediately prior to each measurement [11].

Statistical analysis was performed using IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, version 26.0 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA). Data distribution was assessed for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test. Continuous variables are presented as mean (standard deviation [SD]) for normally distributed data, or median and interquartile range (IQR) for non-normally distributed data. Categorical variables are expressed as frequencies and percentages. Baseline comparisons between participants with DED and those with normal ocular surfaces were performed using the independent-samples t-test for normally distributed continuous variables and the chi-square test for categorical variables. Keratometric and biometric measurements obtained across treatment conditions and post-instillation timepoints are presented descriptively using the reported summary measures. Because measurements under the two artificial-tear conditions were obtained from the same participants in the cross-over design, the treatment-condition columns should not be interpreted as independent participant groups. All statistical tests were two-tailed, and a P -value < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

A total of 40 participants with cataracts were included in the study, comprising 20 eyes with mild-to-moderate DED and 20 eyes with clinically normal ocular surfaces (Figure 1). Baseline demographic and clinical characteristics are summarized in Table 1. Participants with DED were significantly older than those with normal ocular surfaces ($P < 0.05$). There were no significant differences between groups in terms of sex distribution or IOP (both $P > 0.05$). BCDVA distribution differed significantly between groups ($P < 0.001$), with poorer visual acuity more frequently observed in the dry eye group. As expected, ocular surface parameters differed significantly, with lower Schirmer test I values and reduced TBUT in the dry eye group. (both $P < 0.001$), consistent with tear film instability and decreased tear production (Table 1).

At baseline, mean K_1 values were higher in the dry-eye conditions than in the normal-eye conditions, whereas mean K_2 values were similar across conditions (Tables 2 and 3). Following artificial tear instillation, K_1 and K_2 measurements showed time-dependent descriptive changes across the four study conditions. These patterns differed across ocular-surface and formulation conditions and remained evident to varying degrees at the 5-min assessment (Tables 2 and 3).

For K_1 measurements, mean values showed time-dependent changes across the study conditions. In both dry-eye conditions, the lowest mean K_1 value was observed at 30 s after instillation. In the normal-eye conditions, mean K_1 values were similar to baseline at 30 s and increased numerically toward the 5-min assessment. The complete descriptive values are presented in Table 2.

For K_2 measurements, mean values also showed differing time-dependent patterns across the study conditions. The largest numerical fluctuations were observed in the dry-eye/high-viscosity condition, whereas comparatively smaller changes were observed in the normal-eye/low-viscosity condition. The complete descriptive values are presented in Table 3.

AL and ACD measurements showed broadly similar distributions across the study conditions and timepoints (Figures 2 and 3).

Calculated IOL power distributions at baseline and 5 min after artificial tear instillation are presented in Figure 4. Descriptive differences between the two timepoints were observed across the study conditions.

Table 1. Baseline demographic and clinical characteristics of the study participants

Variables		Dry eye (n = 20)	Normal eye (n = 20)	P-value
Age (y), Mean $\pm$ SD		58.5 $\pm$ 7.5	51.1 $\pm$ 4.4	0.001
Sex (Male / Female), n (%)		8 (40.0) / 12 (60.0)	12 (60.0) / 8 (40.0)	0.206
BCDVA (Snellen notation), n (%)	6\12	0 (0.0)	4 (20.0)	<0.001
	6\18	0 (0.0)	6 (30.0)	
	6\24	8 (40.0)	9 (45.0)	
	6\36	9 (45.0)	1 (5.0)	
	6\60	3 (15.0)	0 (0.0)	
IOP (mmHg), Mean $\pm$ SD		18.6 $\pm$ 1.7	17.8 $\pm$ 1.3	0.124
Schirmer test I (mm), Mean $\pm$ SD		7.2 $\pm$ 1.3	12.9 $\pm$ 1.6	<0.001
TBUT (s), Mean $\pm$ SD		6.3 $\pm$ 1.2	23.8 $\pm$ 6.5	<0.001

Abbreviations: n, number; y, years; SD, standard deviation; %, percentage; BCDVA, best-corrected distance visual acuity; IOP, intraocular pressure; mmHg, millimeters of mercury; mm, millimeters; TBUT, tear break-up time; s, seconds. Note: *P*-values < 0.05 are presented in bold.

Table 2. Temporal changes in flat keratometry (K_1) measurements across study groups following artificial tear instillation

Variable	D1 (n = 20)	D2 (n = 20)	N1 (n = 20)	N2 (n = 20)
K_1 baseline (D), Mean $\pm$ SD	44.1 $\pm$ 1.6	44.1 $\pm$ 1.6	43.1 $\pm$ 0.6	43.1 $\pm$ 0.6
K_1 30 s (D), Mean $\pm$ SD	43.5 $\pm$ 1.6	43.8 $\pm$ 1.7	43.1 $\pm$ 0.6	43.1 $\pm$ 0.6
K_1 2 min (D), Mean $\pm$ SD	43.9 $\pm$ 1.6	45.0 $\pm$ 1.6	43.4 $\pm$ 0.7	43.2 $\pm$ 0.6
K_1 5 min (D), Mean $\pm$ SD	44.5 $\pm$ 1.8	44.1 $\pm$ 1.9	43.9 $\pm$ 0.7	43.6 $\pm$ 0.7

Abbreviations: n, numbers; K_1 , flat keratometry; D, diopters; SD, standard deviation; s, seconds; min, minutes. Note: D1, dry eye group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; D2, dry eye group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears; N1, normal ocular surface group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; N2, normal ocular surface group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears; Values are presented descriptively as mean $\pm$ SD. D1 and D2 represent measurements from the same dry-eye participants under the high- and low-viscosity artificial-tear conditions, respectively; N1 and N2 similarly represent measurements from the same participants with normal ocular surfaces.

Table 3. Temporal changes in steep keratometry (K_2) measurements across study groups following artificial tear instillation

Variable	D1 (n = 20)	D2 (n = 20)	N1 (n = 20)	N2 (n = 20)
K_2 baseline (D), Mean $\pm$ SD	44.1 $\pm$ 1.7	44.1 $\pm$ 1.7	44.0 $\pm$ 0.8	43.97 $\pm$ 0.8
K_2 30 s (D), Mean $\pm$ SD	43.6 $\pm$ 1.7	44.1 $\pm$ 1.7	44.05 $\pm$ 0.9	44.06 $\pm$ 0.9
K_2 2 min (D), Mean $\pm$ SD	45.0 $\pm$ 1.6	44.08 $\pm$ 1.6	44.21 $\pm$ 1.1	44.0 $\pm$ 1.1
K_2 5 min (D), Mean $\pm$ SD	44.7 $\pm$ 1.8	44.6 $\pm$ 1.7	44.68 $\pm$ 1.2	44.26 $\pm$ 1.1

Abbreviations: n, numbers; K_2 , steep keratometry; D, diopters; SD, standard deviation; s, seconds; min, minutes. Note: D1, dry eye group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; D2, dry eye group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears; N1, normal ocular surface group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; N2, normal ocular surface group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears; Values are presented descriptively as mean $\pm$ SD. D1 and D2 represent measurements from the same dry-eye participants under the high- and low-viscosity artificial-tear conditions, respectively; N1 and N2 similarly represent measurements from the same participants with normal ocular surfaces.

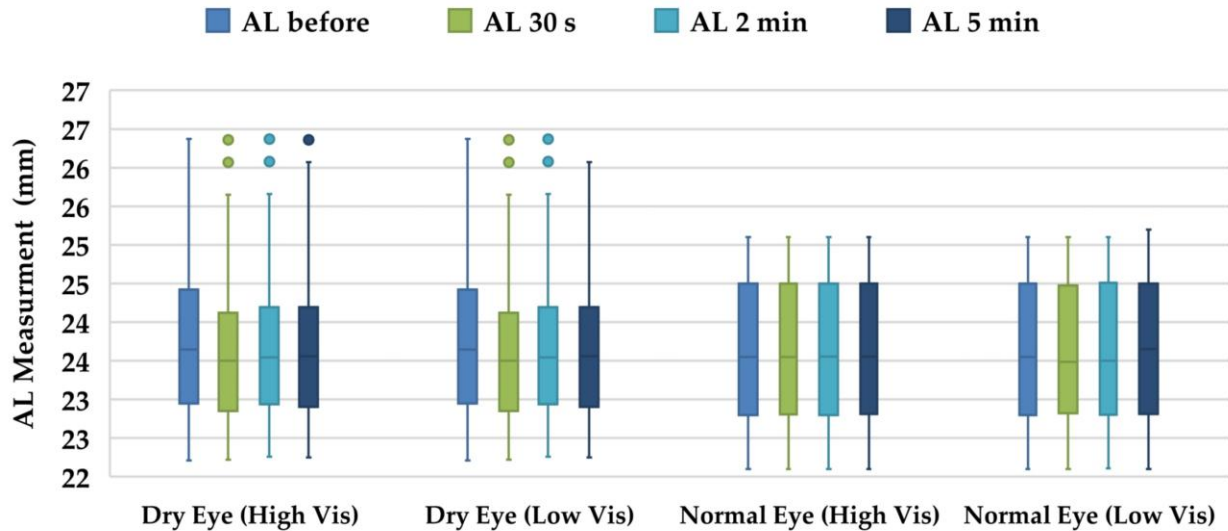


Figure 2. Temporal changes in axial length (AL) measurements in mm following instillation of high- and low-viscosity artificial tears in dry eye and normal ocular surface groups. Measurements were obtained at baseline (AL before), 30 s (AL 30 s), 2 min (AL 2 min), and 5 min (AL 5 min) post-instillation. Dry Eye (High Vis), dry eye group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; Dry Eye (Low Vis), dry eye group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears; Normal Eye (High Vis), normal ocular surface group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; Normal Eye (Low Vis), normal ocular surface group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears.

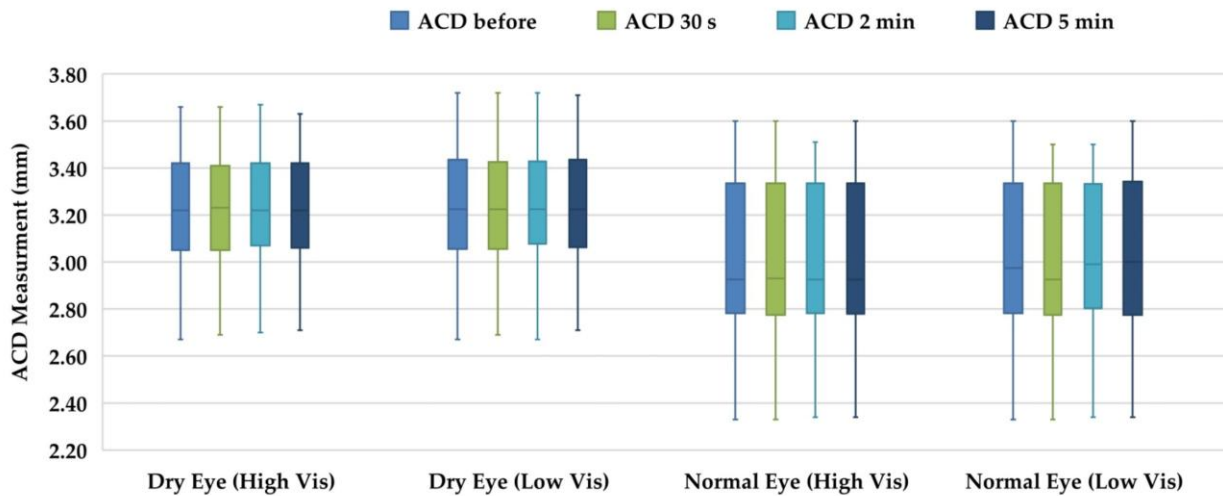


Figure 3. Temporal changes in anterior chamber depth (ACD) measurements in mm following artificial tear instillation in dry eye and normal ocular surface groups. Measurements were obtained at baseline (ACD before), 30 s (ACD 30 s), 2 min (ACD 2 min), and 5 min (ACD 5 min) post-instillation. Dry Eye (High Vis), dry eye group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; Dry Eye (Low Vis), dry eye group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears; Normal Eye (High Vis), normal ocular surface group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; Normal Eye (Low Vis), normal ocular surface group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears.

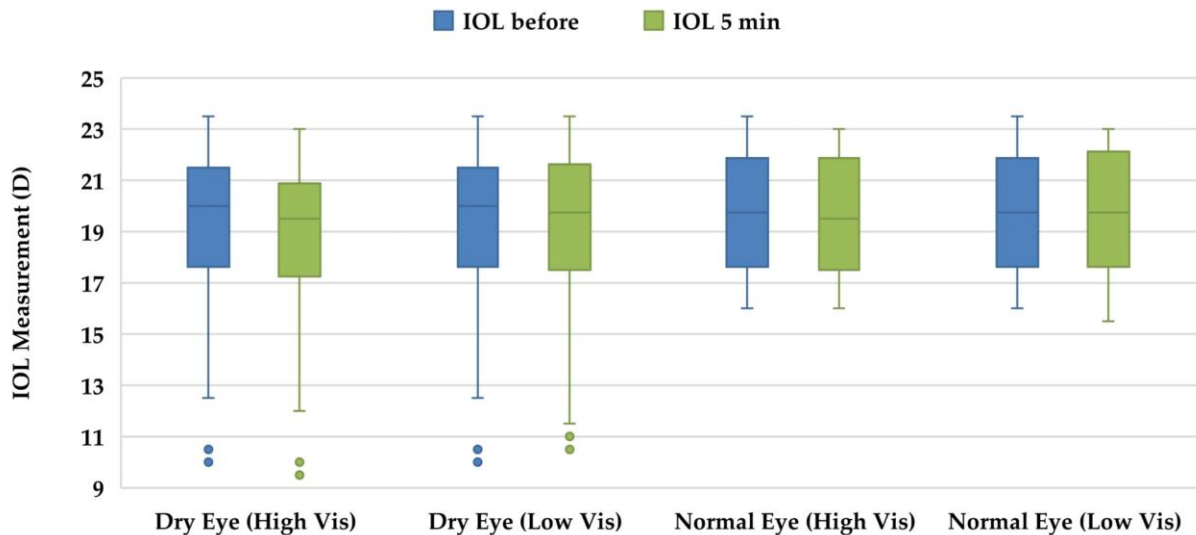


Figure 4. Changes in calculated intraocular lens (IOL) power in diopters before and after artificial tear instillation in dry eye and normal ocular surface groups. Measurements were obtained at baseline (IOL before) and 5 min (IOL 5min) post-instillation. Dry Eye (High Vis), dry eye group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; Dry Eye (Low Vis), dry eye group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears; Normal Eye (High Vis), normal ocular surface group receiving high-viscosity artificial tears; Normal Eye (Low Vis), normal ocular surface group receiving low-viscosity artificial tears.

DISCUSSION

This randomized cross-over study showed time-dependent alterations in keratometric measurements following artificial tear instillation, with differing descriptive patterns across ocular-surface and formulation conditions. Numerically larger changes were observed in some measurements in the dry-eye/high-viscosity condition. In contrast, AL and ACD distributions remained broadly similar across the assessed timepoints.

Our findings are highly concordant with those of Roggla et al. [15], who, in a randomized cross-over study of cataract patients stratified into normal and dry-eye groups, showed that instillation of both low- and high-viscosity artificial tears significantly increases variability in keratometric measurements, particularly within the first minutes after application. Roggla et al. [15] reported that variability peaked early after instillation and progressively diminished over time. In the present study, time-dependent changes were also observed, although some descriptive differences remained evident at the 5-min assessment. Both studies consistently indicate that these effects are more pronounced in dry eye [15], underscoring tear film instability as a key determinant of measurement reliability; this may contribute to increased variability in corneal power assessment and, consequently, to potential prediction errors in IOL power calculation [23]. Roggla et al. [15] further reported clinically meaningful fluctuations, with astigmatic changes exceeding 0.5 D in 13.2% of normal eyes and 34% of dry eyes following instillation of higher-viscosity formulations, findings that are broadly consistent with the descriptive keratometric shifts observed in the dry-eye/high-viscosity condition in our study. However, they focused primarily on measurement variability and repeatability, whereas our study quantified directional and time-dependent changes in K_1 and K_2 , providing a more detailed characterization of the temporal dynamics of tear film-induced alterations. Moreover, while Roggla et al. [15] did not evaluate downstream biometric consequences, our study additionally examined calculated IOL power before and after artificial tear instillation, highlighting a potential downstream implication for refractive planning. Keratometry reflects the optical properties of the tear film-cornea interface and is therefore highly sensitive to transient changes in tear film thickness, smoothness, and regularity following drop instillation [23]. Accordingly, measurement variability peaks early, typically at 30 s, and decreases progressively over time [24]. These studies reinforce that artificial tear instillation may produce short-term changes in keratometric measurements and support avoiding biometry immediately after instillation. Because some changes in the present study remained evident at 5 min, the optimal waiting interval cannot be determined from these data alone.

The present findings partially align with those of Chen et al. [11], who, in a prospective repeated-measures study using swept-source optical coherence tomography (SS-OCT)-based biometry (IOLMaster 700), showed that artificial tear instillation induces time-dependent alterations in multiple ocular parameters, particularly within the first minutes after application, supporting a minimum 5-min delay before measurement. They reported significant intergroup differences in K_1 at 2 and 5 min, along with transient changes in corneal curvature radii (R_1 , R_2). They also observed early increases in ACD at 30 s in both groups and at 2 min specifically within the dry eye group, plus significant within-group changes in central corneal thickness at all post-instillation timepoints, reflecting tear film augmentation and the prolonged ocular surface

residence of sodium hyaluronate. The same study reported no significant difference in AL between dry eye and non-dry eye groups; however, a transient increase in AL was observed at 30 s following artificial tear instillation in both groups. This finding was attributed to the measurement principle of the device, which calculates AL from the tear film-air interface to the retinal pigment epithelium, rendering AL sensitive to temporary increases in tear film thickness after drop instillation [11]. In contrast, AL and ACD distributions in our study were broadly similar across the assessed timepoints. These descriptive findings suggest that the changes observed in keratometric measurements were more evident than those observed in AL and ACD. This discrepancy likely reflects fundamental differences in measurement principles and study design.

Chen et al. [11] evaluated a single formulation (0.1% sodium hyaluronate, preservative-free), whereas our randomized cross-over design provides additional evidence that time-dependent measurement patterns may differ between artificial-tear formulations and ocular-surface conditions. Formulation-related differences in tear-film residence and optical-surface properties may contribute to these transient refractive shifts. Differences in study populations; young, predominantly healthy individuals versus older cataract patients, together with variations in tear film characteristics, device technology, and experimental design likely account for the broader biometric changes observed by Chen et al. [11]. These complementary findings underscore that both tear film dynamics and formulation properties critically influence biometric accuracy, and that their effects are context-dependent, with important implications for optimizing preoperative measurement protocols.

Our findings are strongly supported by Hiraoka et al. [25], who demonstrated that DED significantly impairs the repeatability of corneal curvature measurements, particularly in the steep meridian, and that this variability is related to tear film instability, as reflected by reduced TBUT. While they quantified this effect through within-session measurement variability, our study extends these observations by showing dynamic, time-dependent alterations in keratometric values following artificial tear instillation, thereby demonstrating transient shifts in measured corneal power. Findings of both studies may imply that air-tear film interface acts as the primary refractive surface and that instability in this layer introduces optical irregularities that degrade measurement reliability. They [25] further reported correlations between DED severity markers (TBUT and corneal staining) and AL repeatability, suggesting that tear film disruption may influence deeper biometric signals. In contrast, AL and ACD distributions in our study were broadly similar across the assessed timepoints, indicating that, in the context of controlled tear film modulation with artificial tears, the impact is predominantly confined to the anterior corneal surface rather than affecting axial measurements. These differences likely reflect methodological and physiological distinctions. Hiraoka et al. [25] evaluated intrinsic tear film instability without intervention, capturing chronic variability in measurement repeatability, whereas our cross-over design assessed acute tear film modulation, showing transient, formulation-associated changes in keratometric measurements. Moreover, the descriptive changes observed in the dry-eye conditions, including the high-viscosity formulation, support the concept that tear film thickness and viscoelastic properties can transiently reshape the anterior refractive interface, contributing to the observed time-dependent changes in keratometric measurements. While Hiraoka et al. [25] provide foundational evidence that DED compromises measurement precision, our findings indicate that keratometric values may vary following artificial tear instillation, with potential implications for IOL power calculation. These complementary findings underscore that both baseline ocular surface status and pre-measurement interventions must be carefully controlled to optimize biometric accuracy in cataract patients.

Our findings are broadly consistent with those of Pandey et al. [26], who evaluated the impact of artificial tears of varying viscosities on keratometric measurements in cataract patients with mild-to-moderate dry eye. They demonstrated that both low- and high-viscosity artificial tears induce statistically significant changes in K_1 at early (1 min) and later (5 min) timepoints, while K_2 and astigmatic axis remained largely stable. This selective effect on the flatter meridian is in close agreement with our observations, supporting the concept that tear film alterations preferentially influence corneal curvature measurements along the flat axis. However, they [26] employed a sequential, cross-sectional design without randomization and assessed only two post-instillation timepoints (1 and 5 min), whereas our randomized cross-over design with repeated measurements at 30 s, 2 min, and 5 min allowed for a more detailed characterization of the early dynamic changes and recovery profile. They reported persistent significant elevation in K_1 at 5 min, and descriptive differences in our study also remained evident in some conditions at the 5-min assessment; this suggests that the temporal profile of tear-film normalization may vary depending on study design, measurement technique, and tear formulation. While Pandey et al. focused primarily on keratometric variation [26], our study extends these observations by additionally examining calculated IOL power before and after artificial tear instillation, highlighting a potential downstream implication for refractive planning. Both studies support the premise that artificial tears can transiently modify the optical properties of the tear film-cornea interface and thereby influence keratometric measurements. These findings reinforce the clinical relevance of tear-film dynamics in cataract biometry and highlight the potential importance of both formulation and timing in keratometric assessment. They further underscore the need for appropriate timing of keratometric assessment following artificial tear instillation to minimize refractive error in cataract surgery planning.

This study has several strengths, including its randomized cross-over design, inclusion of both dry eye and normal ocular surface groups, and standardized measurement conditions, enhancing internal validity. Limitations are a relatively small sample size and a short observation period ≤ 5 min, precluding assessment of longer-term effects. Accordingly, the observed differences between ocular-surface and formulation conditions should be interpreted descriptively, and the 5-min assessment should not be considered evidence of complete measurement stabilization. Future studies with larger cohorts

and extended follow-up are warranted to evaluate the persistence of these effects across different formulations and severities of DED. Additionally, correlating these findings with postoperative refractive outcomes would further establish their clinical significance.

CONCLUSIONS

Artificial tear instillation was associated with transient time-dependent changes in keratometric measurements, with differing descriptive patterns across ocular-surface and formulation conditions. These findings highlight the importance of timing in optical biometry and suggest that keratometric measurements obtained shortly after drop instillation should be interpreted cautiously. Because some changes remained evident at the 5-min assessment, the optimal waiting interval requires further investigation. Given the potential impact on IOL power calculations, careful optimization of the ocular surface remains important for accurate refractive planning in cataract surgery.

ETHICAL DECLARATIONS

Ethical approval: The study protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Medicine, Port Said University (ERN: MED (3/11/2024) s.no(199) OPT824_005). All procedures adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to enrollment and before the initiation of any study-related procedures. The trial was prospectively registered with the Pan African Clinical Trials Registry [17].

Conflict of interests: None.

FUNDING

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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