

Blepharitis

Blepharitis is a common condition where there is inflammation of the eyelid margins.

Blepharitis is a long-term condition that cannot be cured but can be managed, similar to a dry and flaky scalp.

It is often worse in patients with eczema, asthma or rosacea

Symptoms

- Itchy, burning eyes
- Eyelids that stick together, often in the morning or on waking
- Eyelids that are crusty or greasy
- Sore and red eyelids
- It can predispose to cysts in the eyelids known as chalazion (styes)

On the edges of the upper and lower eyelids lie some oil glands. They sit just behind the eyelashes and produce oil, an important part of your tears. Tears are a mixture of oil and water. The watery part comes from the lacrimal gland, which sits behind the brow bone. In blepharitis the oil glands become blocked.

As a result your tears are too thin, made up mainly of water. They run down your face rather than sitting on the front surface of the eye to moisturize them resulting in dry eye.

The oil builds up in the glands making the lid edges swell or become sore and red.

Dead skin cells mix with the thick oil droplets forming flakes. The flakes then move along the eyelashes and drop onto the eye further exacerbating the grittiness that you feel. You cannot see this when you look in the mirror but your eye doctor can see it clearly through the microscope.

'Lid hygiene' is the term eye doctors use to describe a special way of treating the eyelids in blepharitis. This does not mean that your eyelids are dirty.

Warm compresses using a face flannel and warm tap water are used to dilate the blocked openings to the oil glands and soften the oil trapped within. You don't need to boil water. A face cloth is better than cotton pads or buds. The flannel is thicker and can hold the heat for longer. Hold it over your closed eyes for 1-2 minutes, then rinse under warm water and with your eyes closed place the flannel over the lid margins and scrub firmly along the eye lids. The pressure from your fingertips will help to express the oil and the abrasiveness of the flannel moving side to side will lift the flakes off the eyelashes. It is important to do this twice daily.

It is usual to prescribe a lubricating drop to use in conjunction with lid hygiene. The tear quality is poor due to lack of oil so the lubricating drops help to moisturize the eye. Blepharitis is not an infection so antibiotic drops do not work. Thicker gel lubricants last longer than drops but can blur the vision. It is often helpful to use drops in the day and apply them more frequently reserving the gel for evening application.

Other treatments

For severe cases and in patients with Rosacea, a 3-month course of doxycycline 100mg once a day can be very helpful. This can be extended or repeated depending on symptoms. Doxycycline is well tolerated but it can make you itchy in bright sunlight. If this occurs you must stop it.

Flax seed oil capsules may be helpful in alleviating blepharitis symptoms in some patients. They contain Omega 3 oils and are thought to reduce inflammation and help improve the flow of oil from the glands in the eyelids.