



Blepharitis

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Introduction

Blepharitis is a chronic inflammation of the eyelids around the base of the eyelashes that may wax and wane over time. Blepharitis is more common in adults than in children and the incidence increases with age. Although there is no cure for blepharitis, it is not a sight-threatening problem and the symptoms can often be managed through proper eyelid care and hygiene. Eyelid care in patients with a history of blepharitis is a lifelong commitment and should be continued even when symptoms have improved to prevent exacerbations.

Symptoms

Patients with blepharitis experience chronic recurrent symptoms that involve both eyes and may vary in intensity over time. Symptoms are often worse in the morning and may include:

- Red, swollen, or itchy eyelids
- Crusting of the eyelashes with eyelid sticking
- Eyelids that appear greasy
- Flaking of the eyelid skin
- Dry eyes
- Irritating or watery eyes
- Feeling of having something in the eye (gritty feeling)
- Burning or stinging sensation
- Blurred vision that improves with blinking
- Sensitivity to light (photophobia)
- Discoloured, missing or misdirected eye lashes

Causes

Blepharitis is not caused by poor hygiene, but by inflammation at the base of the eyelashes (anterior blepharitis) or inflammation of

the meibomian glands that produce the oily layer of the tear film, critical for normal eye lubrication (posterior blepharitis). Although the causes and symptoms of these two types of blepharitis may differ slightly, there is considerable overlap between the two conditions.

Some of the possible causes of blepharitis include:

- Chronic bacterial (Staphylococcal) infection (especially blepharitis at the base of the eyelashes characterised by crusting)
- Chronic viral infection (e.g. herpes simplex or varicella zoster, often with clear discharge)
- Parasites (*Demodex folliculorum* or *Demodex brevis*)
- Blocked oil glands (with hard waxy plugs)
- Allergic dermatitis
- Scalp dandruff (seborrhoeic dermatitis)
- Acne rosacea
- Eczema
- Psoriasis
- Irritants such as cosmetics, contact lens solutions or eye drops

Blocked oil glands result in a dysfunctional tear film with tears evaporating too quickly resulting in dry eye and increased tear production (watery eyes) to try and compensate for dry eyes.

Allergic conjunctivitis, smoking, contact lens use and the use of retinoids may exacerbate blepharitis symptoms.

Management

Patients with mild to moderate symptoms can generally manage the condition by adhering to good eyelid hygiene and other measures to prevent or minimise exacerbations. These may include:

- Application of warm compresses using a cloth soaked in warm (not scalding) water for a total of 5–10 minutes at a time, reheating the cloth when it cools down as necessary. The process may be repeated two to four times daily during periods of exacerbation. Frequency may be reduced as symptoms improve.
- Lid massages directly following the warm compresses may help clear blockages of the glands. Eyelids should be massaged in a

gentle circular motion using a washing cloth, finger, or a cotton bud.

- Eyelids should be washed gently to remove crusting and patients may use warm water or a dilute solution of baby shampoo (a few drops in half a cup of warm water) on a soft washing cloth, gauze pad or cotton swab. If shampoo is used, thorough rinsing is recommended.

Those patients who develop blepharitis following exposure to an irritant should try and avoid or limit such exposure. Patients should be meticulous in removing make-up before going to sleep. Patients should also be advised to keep applicators clean. Contact lenses may be worn if comfortable and patients who experience problems with lenses or lens solutions should speak to their optometrist.

Patients may need to use artificial tear eye drops to treat dry eyes associated with blepharitis. Lubrication may also improve contact lens tolerance in patients with blepharitis.

When to refer

Patients who continue to have symptoms despite adhering to these management principles may need treatment with antibiotics and should be referred to a doctor. Patients with the following signs and symptoms also need to be referred to a doctor:

- Severe eye redness
- Severe eye pain
- Impaired vision
- Severe light sensitivity

Conclusion

Blepharitis is a chronic condition that comes and goes over time and will need lifelong management to reduce or prevent exacerbations.

Although blepharitis does not damage the cornea or result in visual loss, it is inconvenient and unattractive. Continuous management with good eyelid hygiene is required and patients with dry eyes may apply natural tear eye drops. Patients who do not obtain relief with these measures or those with severe eye pain, redness, or light sensitivity or with impaired vision need to be referred to a doctor for further assessment.

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