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Blepharitis

Blepharitis is an inflammation of the eyelid margins. It is not usually serious, but may be an uncomfortable, irritating problem. Blepharitis is typically chronic (persistent). Both eyes are usually affected.

What causes blepharitis?

There are three main types of blepharitis which can cause similar symptoms: staphylococcal blepharitis, seborrhoeic blepharitis and meibomian blepharitis.

Staphylococcal blepharitis

This type of blepharitis is caused by *Staphylococcus* bacteria. *Staphylococcus* lives in low numbers on the skin without doing any harm. However, in some people the *Staphylococcus* produces a localised infection to cause eyelid blepharitis.

Seborrhoeic blepharitis

Seborrhoeic dermatitis is a condition where the skin becomes more oily and scaly. Seborrhoeic dermatitis typically causes bad dandruff and sometimes a rash, commonly on the face and upper body. A yeast (*Malassezia furfur*) is involved, but it is not just a simple skin infection and it is not contagious (you cannot 'catch' this condition from others). This yeast lives in the sebum (oil) of human skin in most adults. In most people it does no harm. But some people seem to 'react' to this yeast in some way which causes inflammation.

Meibomian blepharitis — often called meibomian gland dysfunction

The tiny meibomian glands in the eyelids lie just behind the eyelashes. There are 25-30 meibomian glands on each eyelid. They produce oily secretion which comes out at the eyelid margin. This oily fluid forms the outer layer of the tear film which lubricates the front of the eye. People with meibomian blepharitis have a problem with their meibomian glands. This may lead to eyelid inflammation. This also explains why people with meibomian blepharitis often have dry eye symptoms since the tear film quality is disrupted.

Combinations of the above

In practice, seborrhoeic blepharitis commonly occurs together with meibomian blepharitis. Inflamed skin which is more likely to become infected by the *Staphylococcus*. So, all three causes may contribute to many cases with the main cause varying from case to case.

A vicious circle may play a part

In vulnerable individuals blepharitis tends to 'flare-up' for a time and then ease off in severity. Sometimes a 'vicious cycle' may play a part. For example, your eyelids may become slightly inflamed and sore, but not too bad. You may then rub them making the inflammation worse. This in turn can lead to your eyelids feeling worse. You may then rub them more, which leads to more inflammation, and so on.

What are the symptoms of blepharitis?

- Sore eyelids.
- The eyelids may look inflamed or greasy.
- The eyes may become 'sticky' with discharge. In particular, the eyelids may stick together in the morning.
- Sometimes tiny flakes or scales appear on the eyelids which look like small flakes of dandruff. Crusts may develop at the base of eyelashes.
- One or more of the tiny glands of the eyelids (meibomian glands) may block and fill with an oily fluid.

Symptoms often 'come and go'. Typically, symptoms flare up from time to time, but you may have long periods without any symptoms.

Three other conditions are commonly associated with blepharitis. So, you may also have one or more of these conditions. They are:

- Dry eye syndrome. This is especially if you have meibomian blepharitis when the tiny glands in the eyelids do not function as well as normal.
- Seborrhoeic dermatitis - described above.
- Rosacea. Symptoms include facial flushing, and persistent central facial redness.

What is the treatment for blepharitis?

There is no one-off cure as the inflammation tends to recur if you do not keep up with treatment. However, with regular treatment, symptoms can usually be eased and then kept to a minimum. The main treatment is regular eyelid hygiene. Other treatments that may be needed include antibiotics, and treatment of associated conditions.

1. Warmth

The purpose of warmth is to soften any crusts attached to the eyelids. Warmth also helps to 'unplug' blocked glands and allow the oily secretions to flow more readily. Warmth should be applied to the eyelids for about five minutes.

The traditional method is to gently press on the eyelids with a flannel (facecloth) soaked in very warm water for 5 minutes. When the flannel cools, keep re-warming it in the warm water.

A popular alternative is to use a specially designed heat bag which you place over your eyes for about five minutes. For example, the EyeBag™ which you can buy online. To get the heat bags hot you place them in a microwave for a short time. The advantage of a heat bag over a hot flannel is that the heat is retained longer and keeps constant warmth over the eyes. You can simply lie down and relax for five minutes with the bag placed over your eyes.

2. Massage

Massage the eyelids immediately after applying the warmth. Massaging helps to push out the oily fluid from the tiny meibomian glands. To massage the eyelids-

- Start with the upper lid. Put the index or middle finger pad (fingertip) in the corner of the eye next to the nose, just resting on the eyelid above the lashes. Then sweep the finger gently but firmly along the eyelid to the outer end.
- Repeat this with the lower lid, placing the pad of the finger just below the lashes in the corner of the eye and sweeping outwards towards the temple.
- Repeat this sweeping massage action 5 to 10 times over about 30 seconds immediately following the warming.
- Massaging should neither be too gentle nor too firm. It should be relatively comfortable and you should not press hard enough to actually hurt your eyeball under the closed lids. Always massage with the eyes shut.

3. Clean

After warmth and massage, clean the eyelids:

- The traditional way is to use a cotton wool bud that has been dipped in diluted baby shampoo. Just add a few drops of baby shampoo to an egg cup of warm water so that the ratio of water to shampoo is about 10:1. In particular, try to clean off any crusts at the base of the eyelids. After cleaning the eyelids with the cotton wool bud, wash off the shampoo from the eyelids with a flannel or cloth.
- Some people recommend using special eyelid scrubs that you can buy at some opticians / optometrists.

If you are prone to blepharitis it is best to think of this as part of your daily routine - just like brushing your teeth. This is the best way to keep symptoms away, or to a minimum.

Antibiotic treatments

Antibiotic eye drops may be advised for a while if an eyelid becomes infected. If you are prescribed ointment, place it on the edge of the eyelid (not the eye) after cleaning the eyelid in the way described above. Antibiotic tablets are also commonly used for troublesome infected eyelids. Note: a three month course of antibiotics may be used in the treatment of blepharitis.

