What is blepharitis?

Blepharitis means inflammation of the eyelid. It is usually used to describe inflammation of the lid margins at the base of the lashes. This may affect the outer side of the lid edge in the form of dandruff like flakes; or inner edge, which is due to inflammation of the oily glands (the Meibomian glands) known as meibomianitis. These glands run through the substance of the lid and open onto the edge of the lid. It may also be a mixture of the two. It can affect people of all ages, but usually first appears at a younger age. It can be mild or severe.

What causes blepharitis?

The most common cause of this inflammation is an abnormality of the secretions of the glands. The secretions may be thicker than normal, like butter or lard rather than oil. This causes the substance to remain in the lid, resulting in irritation. The irritation causes inflammation. The lids may also have a mild chronic infection.

What are the symptoms of blepharitis?

Blepharitis may cause numerous symptoms; these may affect the eyes or the lids, or both, and include:

- irritation
- sensitivity to light
- soreness
- crusts
- redness
- watery eyes
- stickiness
- blocked glands
- cysts
- swelling of the lids
- loss of lashes
- sore, uncomfortable dry eyes

Scarring of the lids may occur in some sever and long-standing cases, resulting in ‘turning in’ of the eyelid and lashes. This can lead to the eyesight being affected if it is not treated.
What makes it worse?

Smoke, wind, allergy, diet (low in important oils - see next page), alcohol consumption, dust and a dry atmosphere have all been linked. Some skin conditions, such as rosacea, eczema, acne and acne treatments are also linked.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for blepharitis, but it can be treated and kept under control with a few simple, long-term measures. These are:

- hot compresses and lid massage
- treating associated skin conditions such as rosacea and eczema
- treating dandruff on the scalp
- lubricants for dry eyes.

Antibiotics are rarely required for infection.

How to do hot compresses and lid massage

Equipment needed

You will need the following:

1. very warm water
2. face cloth/flannel or clean towel
3. cotton buds.

For the hot compress, take water that is bearably hot, but not boiling. Use a flannel, face cloth or the corner of a clean folded towel and dip it in the hot water. Wring out slightly. Apply the compress to closed eyelid on one side for a few minutes, until the lid has warmed or the compress is starting to cool. This softens the skin and any crusts attached to the eyelids.

Now hold the lids taut with a finger and massage the lids on the base of the lashes firmly with a cotton bud to clear the lids of any debris. Repeat the whole process on the other side.

This should be repeated at least twice a day when the disease is causing you problems, but it can be done more frequently if you like. Once the condition has improved, it should be carried out at least once a day to prevent the problem coming back.

What happens if I stop the treatment?

If you stop the treatment, the lids will again become inflamed and will not settle fully until treatment has been resumed.

Are there any complications of blepharitis?

Complications are usually relatively minor but if left untreated for many years, can cause serious problems.
Minor problems are symptoms of discomfort, dryness or watering eyes. Recurrent blocked glands can lead to lump(s) in the lid, called chalazion.

The main problem is due to scarring of the lid. This causes in-turned eyelashes, which irritate the eye. This can cause redness, watering, discomfort and discharge. In-turned lashes may be pulled out, but if they keep coming back, the lid may need to be frozen so that the affected eyelashes are destroyed. If they are not dealt with, the eye sight can be affected.

Is there anything else that I can do to help myself?

Diet has a significant effect on the surface of the eye. You should avoid saturated and transfats (a type of unsaturated fat). Patients with blepharitis have reported that some fats such as Omega 3 fish oils and flaxseed oil are helpful.

Further information

You can get further information at: www.eye-care.org.uk this is a registered charity that exists to raise awareness of all aspects of eye health.

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