

COMMON OCULAR ALLERGIES

INTRODUCTION

Allergy reactions in the eye are usually due to airborne allergens, contact allergens, and reactions to allergens associated with various microbial agents (bacteria, viruses etc).

Most allergic reactions are local. In other words, the allergen gets into the eye.

Sometimes eye allergies can be due to systemic hypersensitivity. In other words, something that is causing a general body allergic response.

Hence the only true way to cure an allergy is either to:

1. Remove the cause of the allergy. This may not always be practical or it may be difficult to isolate a single allergen as the cause.

OR

2. Become desensitised to the particular allergen. Course of immunotherapy provided by an allergist may help desensitise the patient to specific allergens, however, may only be considered in severe cases due to the expense and time involved in testing and treatment.

THE MAIN TYPES OF OCULAR ALLERGIES

1. Acute Hay Fever Conjunctivitis.

Allergen

Most common agents are pollens, animal hairs or danders, feathers, mould spores, house dust, insects and scents.

Symptoms

- Patients complain of moderate itching, tearing, burning, and a feeling of pressure behind the eye.
- A stringy discharge maybe present. The eyes may be red with slight swelling in the lids and small papillae (little bumps) under the top and bottom eyelids.

Treatment

- a) Mild symptoms may be annoying, but not require medication. Avoidance of the known allergens is the first line of treatment.
- b) If required irrigation twice daily with sterile saline plus application of cold compresses may relieve discomfort.
- c) Severe symptoms also need a decongestant/antihistamine eye drop.

2. Chronic Hay Fever Conjunctivitis

Allergen

Unlike acute hay fever, responses which may be due to seasonal allergens (eg grass, trees or weed pollens) this type of chronic condition may be due to perennial allergens such as house dust mites, fungi, feathers, and chronic viral or bacterial infection.

Symptoms

- Tend to have more long term or chronic complaint of red eye, itching, burning, glare sensitivity and dryness.
- Have mild swelling in the lids.
- The papillae, or small bumps under the lids, tend to be a little bit larger in chronic conjunctivitis, hence are called the follicles.
- A watery or slightly pussy discharge may also be present.

Treatment

Same measures as treated for acute hay fever conjunctivitis.

- a) Avoidance of known allergens.
- b) Cold compresses.
- c) Antihistamine/decongestant combination eye drop.
- d) Possibly antibacterial eye ointments.

Severe cases should be treated by your GP or a referral to an allergy specialist.

3. Microbialallergic Conjunctivitis.

Allergen

Majority of cases due to bacterial conjunctivitis.

Symptom

- Patient presenting with red eyes for a considerable period of time.
- Eyes feel irritated, dry and itchy.
- Lid margins show swelling, red and some small papillae (small bumps inside the lid margin).
- A high percentage of patients also have associated blepharitis. This is an infection of the lash follicle and causes the lid margin to be red with small scales or crusty sleep-like material stuck to the lid margins at the base of the lashes.

Treatment

- a) Lid scrubs twice daily with a mild lid cleanser (eg diluted Baby Shampoo).
- b) An application of antibiotic ointment rubbed into the lashes.

c) Cold compresses.