

Styes

A stye is a sore and red lump near the edge of an eyelid. It is caused by an infection at the base of an eyelash (in the follicle). Staphylococcal bacteria are the usual culprits. These bacteria normally live harmlessly on the skin, but they can cause infection if the skin is damaged. Touching mucus from the nose and then rubbing the eye is one way of moving staphylococcal bacteria to the eyelid.

Styes may be red and sore, but they generally do not cause any damage to the eye or eyelids. Most clear up within a few days, even if no treatment is received. However, the infection from one stye can sometimes spread and cause more styes. Rarely, the entire eyelid may become infected. This requires medical treatment, including antibiotics. Some people seem to get many styes, while others get few or none at all.

Symptoms

The way a stye develops includes:

- A painful, red and tender lump develops on the eyelid.
- The lump gets larger and may develop a white or yellow top. This means there is pus in the stye, and is called 'pointing'. The point can be along the edge of the eyelid (where eyelashes grow), or it can be inside the eyelid. It is not usual for it to be on the outside of the eyelid.
- The stye can irritate the eye, causing it to water, and it can feel like there is something 'in the eye' (like when an eyelash gets onto the surface of the eye).
- The surface over the stye may break, releasing the pus, or the swelling may go away without bursting, when the body's immune system is able to control the infection.
- If the pus drains out of the stye, the lump goes away quite quickly. Otherwise, the swelling may take longer to go down.

Treatment options

Styes can be painful and very irritating. Hot 'compresses' can help relieve the pain and may also help to get rid of the infection. For many centuries, it has been believed that hot compresses 'draw out infections'. A hot compress is a piece of material (such as cotton balls), which is heated in hot water. It needs to be as hot as the person can manage comfortably, without being so hot as to burn the skin. It is probably best that the person with the stye manages this, to keep the risk of a burn low. The hot, wet material is placed on the eyelid for several minutes, until it cools, then it is replaced with another compress. This is done several times a day. Paracetamol will also help relieve the pain of a stye.

Sometimes, antibiotic ointments may be needed and, occasionally, the person will need oral antibiotics (taken by mouth). In some cases, a stye will need to be opened up (lanced) by a doctor, if the stye does not get better by itself. If the lump is still painful and hot after a few days, get your doctor to check your eye.

Warning – do not squeeze a stye

Do not try to squeeze the pus out of a stye. If the stye is not ready to burst, the infected pus may be squeezed into the tissue next to the stye, causing the infection to spread further.

Preventing spread of infection

Suggestions to prevent the spread of infection include:

- Don't touch, rub or squeeze the stye.
- Dispose of a used 'compress' in a rubbish bin, so that others do not have to handle it.
- Wash your hands frequently.

Blocked sebaceous gland

Skin is lubricated and waterproofed by a greasy substance called sebum, which is made by sebaceous glands. If a blocked sebaceous gland is in the eyelid, it may look similar to a sty (when it swells with sebum), but it is not painful or red. Blocked sebaceous glands will often go without any treatment, but they may need to be cut out if the lump is irritating the eye.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Ophthalmologist (eye specialist)
- Optometrist.

Things to remember

- A sty is an infection at the base of an eyelash (in the follicle), usually caused by staphylococcal bacteria.
- Don't rub or squeeze the sty, as this can cause the infection to spread.
- Treatment options include hot compresses, antibiotic ointments, oral antibiotics or operating on the lump (lancing) to drain out the pus.

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