

Herpes simplex keratitis

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What is Herpes Simplex Keratitis?

Herpes simplex virus (HSV) is a virus which can infect the cornea, the clear dome-shaped window at the front of the eye. The infection is usually caused by the herpes simplex virus 1, the same virus which causes cold sores.

What are the symptoms?

- Blurred vision
- Eye pain
- Foreign body sensation, like you have something in your eye
- A red eye
- A watering eye
- Sensitivity to light
- You may have small blisters or swelling of the eyelid

Symptoms can be worse if you have eczema or a reduced ability to fight infection eg taking medicine that suppresses the immune system.

What causes HSV keratitis?

HSV-1 is a very common virus. It is passed from person to person by coughing, sneezing and touching. Most adults have been infected by HSV-1. It is possible you may not have noticed any symptoms when you were first infected. After the first infection, the virus is not fully cleared by the immune system but remains dormant or sleeping in the nerves of the face. It can re-activate to cause problems at any time, but typically when

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a person is particularly stressed, run down or ill. The virus can cause an ulcer on the cornea, which is essentially a cold sore in the eye.

How is it diagnosed?

To make the diagnosis of HSV keratitis a viral swab may be taken from the cornea. The practitioner will use numbing drops so the procedure is painless. The eye may feel a little gritty afterwards which should soon settle. This swab may confirm the presence of HSV. However, a negative result does not mean you don't have HSV as testing may not be positive in 100% of cases.

What is the treatment?

1. **Anti-viral eye ointment:** a course of anti-viral ointment is enough to treat most cases
2. **Anti-viral tablets:** a 7 day course of antiviral tablets (eg acyclovir) may be required in severe or recurrent cases or if the virus is affecting the deeper layers of the cornea
3. **Steroid eye drops:** some cases, particularly those affecting deeper layers of cornea, may require steroid drops to reduce inflammation and minimise scarring

Further advice

- The virus can spread directly from the eye, so avoid touching your eye and wash your hands regularly to stop the virus from spreading further
- Contact lenses: if you wear contact lenses these should not be worn until the condition has been fully treated and all symptoms have gone

What are the complications?

Recurrence

If you have HSV keratitis, you can suffer repeated episodes. Just like cold sores, the virus can re-emerge at any time. Around half the people who

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get HSV keratitis will get it again within 5 years. In about 1 in 10 people the virus comes back within a year. If you keep getting repeated infection, your doctor may recommend taking a daily antiviral tablet to reduce your risk of future episodes.

Visual loss

Severe or repeated episodes can result in scarring of the cornea which causes blurred vision. Starting treatment quickly after a flare up reduces the risk of permanent scarring.

Loss of corneal sensation

Infection can also damage the nerves to the cornea resulting in reduced sensation. This can cause further problems with your eye.

When to seek advice

Each time you have an episode you should see an eye doctor so they can check your eye and give you the correct medication

If you have been seen and given treatment the following should prompt you to contact eye clinic:

- Worse blurring of vision
- If the redness and pain is worsening
- New floaters

How do I contact the hospital?

If you require advice between 9am–5pm please telephone the Ophthalmic Triage Line on 01423 542217.

Further Information

Other sources of useful information can be found at:

NHS www.nhs.co.uk

Harrogate and District NHS Foundation Trust website www.hdft.nhs.uk

National Eye Institute <http://www.nei.nih.gov/health/>

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Feedback

If you have a concern, complaint or compliment, or would like to provide feedback regarding your experience of the Ophthalmology Service / clinic, please contact the Patient Experience Team via the following:

Patient Experience helpline 01423 555499 (Monday – Friday 9.30am – 4pm)

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