Eye Allergy

Allergy and Immunology Awareness Program

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Eye allergy, or allergic conjunctivitis, is a condition characterized by itching, red, tearing or burning eyes. Sometimes, these symptoms may be accompanied by congestion, runny nose, or sneezing due to irritation and sensitivity in the nose. And, while most people treat nasal allergy symptoms, they often ignore their itchy, red, watery eyes.

What causes eye allergies?

Just like hay fever and skin rashes, eye allergies develop when the body's immune system becomes sensitized and overreacts to something that is ordinarily harmless. An allergic reaction can occur whenever that something -called an allergen- comes into contact with your eyes. The allergens causes certain cells on the surface of the eye (called mast cells) to release histamine and other substances or chemicals that cause blood vessels in the eyes to swell, and the eyes to become itchy, red and watery.

What allergens trigger eye allergies?

Allergens that may be present indoors or outdoors can cause eye allergies. The most common outdoor airborne allergens are grass, tree and weed pollens. People who are sensitive to these allergens suffer from seasonal (or intermittent if less than four weeks in duration) allergic

conjunctivitis, the most common type of eye allergy.

Pet hair or dander, dust mites and molds are the most common indoor allergens. These indoor allergens can trigger s symptoms for some people throughout the year, resulting in perennial allergic conjunctivitis. Chronic forms of eye allergy may also caused by cosmetics.

Cigarette smoke, perfume and diesel exhaust may inflame your eyes. They can act as irritants that cause non-allergic symptoms, or they can make your allergic response worse.

Can eye allergies harm my eyesight?

Eye allergies, specifically allergic conjunctivitis, can be extremely annoying and uncomfortable, and they may disrupt your day- to-day activities, but they usually do not harm your eyes. However, the chronic forms of eyes allergies that are associated with atopic dermatitis (eczema) and other diseases can cause inflammation that may affect eyesight especially when left untreated.

How are eye allergies treated?

As with any allergy, the first approach for successful management of seasonal or perennial forms of eye allergy should be prevention or avoidance of the allergens that trigger your symptoms. An allergist can help you identify what is triggering your eye symptoms. Here are some avoidance tips to reduce exposure to allergens that affect your eyes:

- Stay indoors as much as possible when pollen counts are at their peak, usually during the mid-morning and early evening, and when wind is blowing pollens around.
- Keep windows closed and use air conditioning in your car and home. Air conditioning units should be kept clean. Avoid using window fans that can draw pollens and molds into the house.
- Wear glasses or sunglasses when outdoor to minimize pollen getting into your eyes.
- Avoid rubbing eyes, which will only irritate them or make your condition worse.
- Reduce dust mite exposure in your home, especially the bedroom. Bedding particularly pillows, should be encased in “mite-proof” covers. Wash bedding often in hot water (at least 50 degrees). Keep humidity in your home low (between 30% and 50%).
- Clean floors with a damp rag or mop rather than dry dusting or sweeping.
- Wash your hands immediately after petting any animals. Remove and wash clothing after visiting friends with pets.
- If you have a pet to which you are allergic, keep it out of your house as much as possible. If the pet must be in the house, keep it out of your bedroom so you are not exposed to animal allergens while you sleep. Close the air dusts to your bedroom if you have forced-air or central heating/ cooling. Replace carpeting with hardwood, tile or linoleum that are easier to keep dander free.
- Reduce indoor molds caused by high humidity by cleaning bathrooms, kitchens and basements regularly. A dehumidifier can be used to reduce molds, especially in damp, humid places like basements. Make sure the dehumidifier is cleaned often. To clean visible mold in the home, use detergent and a 5% bleach solution as directed.

Because many of the allergens that trigger eye allergies are airborne, avoidance is not always possible. You should discuss your eye allergy symptoms with an allergy specialist or your personal physician to determine which of several treatment options is right for you.

Are OTC and prescription medications are safe for children?

There are eye drops and oral medications available to treat eye allergies in children. Artificial tears are extremely safe and can be used at any age. Some eye drops, such as antihistamines and antihistamines/mast cell stabilizers, can be used in children who are 3 and older. Any treatment should be discussed with your child's physician.

Do allergy shots treat eye allergies?

If available, oral medication and eye drops do not control your symptoms, allergy shots or immunotherapy is an option for relieving eye allergies. Tiny amounts of the allergen are injected with gradually increasing doses over time. The shots can actually keep your body from reacting to the allergens. The treatment takes several months to achieve maximum results and you may

still be required to use medicine.

What are medications used for the treatment of eye allergies?

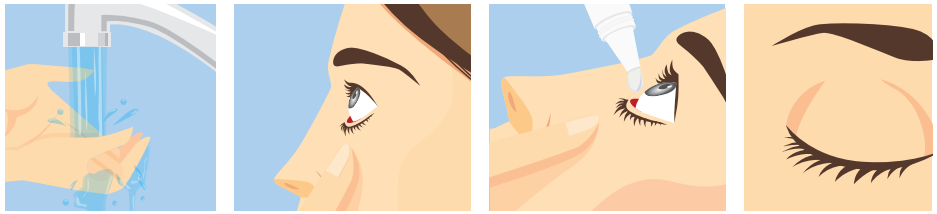
Over-the-counter eye drops and oral medications are commonly used for short-term relief of some eye allergy symptoms. However, they may not relieve all symptoms, and prolonged use of some OTC eye drops may actually cause your condition to become worse. Some can cause "drug induced conjunctivitis"- commonly made worse by the chronic exposure to the preservatives in the eye drops. Such patients may benefit from preservative free forms of medications applied to the eye surface.

Prescription eye drops and oral medications also are used to treat eye allergies. Prescription eye drops provide both short- and long-term targeted relief of eye allergy symptoms, and they can

be used to manage eye allergy symptoms in conjunction with an oral antihistamine that might be taken to manage nasal allergy symptoms.

1- OTC Eye Drops and Medications

- Tear substitutes: Artificial tears can temporarily wash allergens from the eye and also moisten the eyes, which often become dry when red and irritated. These drops, which can be refrigerated to provide additional soothing and comfort, are safe and can be used often an necessary.
- Decongestants-antihistamines: Decongestants or vasoconstrictors are available as over-the-counter eye drops to reduce the redness associated with eye allergies. (Eye drops containing vasoconstrictors should not be used by anyone with glaucoma). The decongestant drops are available alone or in conjunction with an antihistamine, which provides additional relief of itching. The drops are weak and must be used frequently (four to six times a day). It is very important not to use these OTC eye drops for more than two to three days. Prolonged use can actually lead to increased swelling and redness that may last even after discontinuing the drops. You may be familiar with this "rebound effect" that occurs when you use decongestant nasal sprays for more than three days, and your nose become even more congested than before.
- Oral Antihistamines: Oral Antihistamines can be mildly effective in relieving the itching



associated with eye allergies, however these medications may cause dry eyes and potentially worsen eye allergy symptoms. Also, some OTC versions of these medications can cause side effects such as sedation, excitability, dizziness or disturbed coordination.

2- Prescription Eye Drops and Medications

- Antihistamines: eye drops that contain antihistamines can reduce the itching, redness and swelling associated with eye allergies. Although antihistamines eye drops provide quick relief, the effect may last only a few hours, and some of these drops need to be used four times a day.
- Mast Cell Stabilizers: are eye drops that prevent the release of histamine and allergy symptoms. The drops must be started before exposure to an allergen to prevent itching and need to be maintained for weeks during the allergy season.
- Antihistamines/ Mast Cell Stabilizers: some of the newest eye drops have both an antihistamines and a mast cell stabilizers action to treat and prevent eye allergies. There are used twice a day and provide quick and long-lasting relief of itching, redness, tearing and burning.
- NSAIDS: nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory eye drops also are available to relieve itching. These drops may cause stinging or burning when applied and may need to be used four times a day.
- Corticosteroids: steroids eye drops can help treat chronic and severe eye allergy symptoms such as itching, redness and swelling over a short course of time, but continued use of the drops can have side effects, such as a risk of infection, glaucoma and cataracts. Long term treatment with steroids (more than two weeks) should be done only with the supervision of an ophthalmologist.
- Nonsedating oral Antihistamines: Like OTC oral antihistamines, prescription antihistamines can be mildly effective in relieving the itching associated with eye allergies. They do not have the same sedating side effects as OTC antihistamines, but they still can cause dry eyes and worsen symptoms.

Your allergist or personal physician can help determine which treatments are best for you.

Notes:

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