

EYE-Q

by R. Thomas Barowsky, MD

Not All Eye Allergies are Eye Allergies

Ocular rosacea is associated with a chronic skin condition known as acne rosacea. The problem usually affects those with light skin, and is characterized by redness and bumps concentrated on the forehead, nose and cheeks. One of the earliest symptoms of rosacea (often experienced during puberty) is facial flushing brought on by changes in body temperature, emotion, or hot drinks. Eventually, the skin may become chronically red, irritated and inflamed.

Approximately 60% of patients with rosacea develop related problems affecting the eye (ocular rosacea). Patients with ocular rosacea most commonly experience irritation of the lids and eye, occurring when the oil-producing glands of the lids become obstructed. Styes, blepharitis, episcleritis, and chronically red eyes are also typical conditions. Ocular rosacea may also affect the cornea, causing neovascularization (abnormal blood vessel growth), infections, and occasionally ulcers.

The signs and symptoms of acne rosacea include:

- Red flushed skin
- Breakouts or papules concentrated on the nose, forehead, and cheeks
- Facial flushing after drinking alcohol, eating hot or spicy foods, or events that increase body temperature
- Dry, flaking skin

Whereas ocular rosacea is characterized by:

- Chronically red eyes and lid margins
- Irritated eyelids (blepharitis)
- Styes (chalazion)
- Dry, irritated eyes
- Burning
- Foreign body sensation

Those with ocular rosacea are frequently under the care of a dermatologist and are referred for treatment when the patient develops related eye conditions. However, your ophthalmologist may also make the initial diagnosis with a routine eye exam and evaluation of the skin.

Patients with this condition should avoid hot drinks, spicy foods, alcohol, or activities that cause the body temperature to become elevated. Care should be taken to protect the skin from ultraviolet light exposure by using sunscreen with a high SPF factor and wearing hats and sunglasses when outdoors. This is especially true for people who spend a lot of time outdoors. The reflected sunlight off lakes and snow has a big impact on this condition.

Controlling skin inflammation may give marked relief of the eye conditions. Because of this, your ophthalmologist and dermatologist often work together to treat the problem. Eye-related symptoms can often be relieved with warm (not hot) compresses on the lids, eyelid scrubs and artificial tears. There are many good eyelid scrubs on the market that make it convenient to insure good eyelid hygiene but, good old fashioned baby shampoo scrubs using a wet cotton ball is very effective and only a little more messy. Topical and/or oral antibiotics may also be prescribed to reduce symptoms. Typically they must be used continuously to help control the chronic nature of the infection. Recent advances in antibiotic eye drops and gels have made it easier to treat and control the infection portion of the rosacea. Once under control it is not unusual for the rosacea sufferer to only need the gel once or twice each month.

By following your ophthalmologist's recommendations you should see a significant improvement in your symptoms. Just remember this is a chronic condition that is controllable but not curable.

If you have questions about your eye health e-mail Dr. Barowsky at doctom@tdkj.com and we'll try to answer your questions here at Eye-Q.