

Information for Patients

Herpes Simplex Keratitis (Dendritic Ulcer)

What is the Herpes Simplex Virus?

There are two types of herpes simplex virus; type 1 and type 2. Type 1 herpes simplex virus is the usual cause of cold sores around the mouth and herpes simplex infection in the eye. Type 2 herpes simplex virus is the usual cause of genital herpes. It rarely causes cold sores or eye infections.

The herpes simplex virus is very common. Most people become infected with this virus, often during childhood. The virus lies dormant (inactive) in the root of the trigeminal nerve (a nerve in the face). In some people the virus becomes active again and travels along the nerve until it finds a way out, either on the surface of the skin causing a cold sore or the eye causing an ulcer.

What is a Dendrite Ulcer?

A dendritic ulcer occurs when the virus affects the cornea, which is the clear window at the front of your eye.

What are the symptoms?

- Pain in the eye
- Feeling of irritation
- Sensitivity to bright light
- Redness

- Watering
- Blurring of vision

What is the treatment?

The current treatment is with an antiviral medication called Ganciclovir. This is given as an eye ointment 5 times a day for 7-10 days. Depending on your ulcer, different treatment durations and occasionally different medications will be needed. Antiviral tablets might also be given in some cases.

What are the complications?

The main complication is scarring of the cornea. This occurs when the deeper layers of the cornea are affected. Scarring will cause the normally clear cornea to become cloudy with loss of vision. Recurring episodes can make the scarring worse. Prompt treatment with antiviral ointment will help to prevent corneal scarring.

Recurrences

Dendritic ulcers can recur. It is helpful to keep a tube of unopened cream with you, especially if you are going on holiday. It is quite safe to start treatment yourself if you have an attack; however, you should still seek medical attention within 48 hours of the symptoms recurring.

Dendritic ulcers can recur during times of stress, when tired, or be triggered by sunlight. Dark glasses help during an attack, and could help to prevent a recurrence if worn whilst it is sunny.

In the event of a recurrence you may be able to get treatment from your GP or contact the Emergency Eye Department on (0161) 276 5597, 8.00am – 8.15pm every day.