

## Information for Patients

# Living with Blepharitis & Blepharokeratoconjunctivitis (BKC)

## A Young Person's Guide

### What is blepharitis and BKC?

Blepharitis is a condition that makes your eyelids red, puffy, and sore. It usually affects both eyes. It is very common and can start at any age — even in babies.

Sometimes blepharitis also affects the front of the eye itself. When this happens, it is called blepharokeratoconjunctivitis — or BKC for short. BKC is a long-term condition that keeps coming back and needs to be treated properly, because if it is left untreated it can affect your eyesight. Occasionally, the facial skin may also be affected or there may be other members of the family affected.

Blepharitis and BKC will not go away on their own. But the good news is that with the right care, most children feel much better and have long stretches with no problems at all.

 **The most important thing to know cleaning your eyelids every day is the best thing you can do to keep your eyes comfortable.**

### Who gets it?

BKC is one of the most common eye conditions that children are referred to hospital for. It usually starts when children are between 3 and 5 years old, but it can begin much earlier. Children of any background can get it.

### What causes it?

Nobody fully understands exactly why some children get BKC. It is almost certainly not one single cause — it is usually a mix of things happening together:

- **Blocked oil glands in the eyelids:** Your eyelids have tiny glands that make a thin layer of oil to keep your eyes comfortable. In BKC, these glands get blocked or stop working properly. This makes your eyes feel dry, gritty, and sore.
- **Bacteria on the eyelids:** Everyone has tiny amounts of bacteria living harmlessly on their skin. In some children, too many bacteria build up along the edge of the eyelids and cause irritation and redness.
- **Tiny mites on the eyelashes:** Very small creatures called Demodex mites live on almost everyone's eyelashes without causing any problems. But in some children, too many build up and this triggers inflammation. You might notice crusty specks at the base of the lashes — this is a sign these mites may be involved. Special tea tree oil eyelid products can help with this.
- **Some medicines:** Certain medicines used to treat other health conditions — such as some cancer treatments or some medicines for eczema or arthritis — can occasionally cause or worsen eyelid inflammation as a side effect. If your child takes any regular medicines, it is worth mentioning this to your eye doctor.

**⚠ Important:** BKC is not caused by being unclean or not washing properly. It is not your child's fault - and it is not something you did wrong as a parent.

## What does it look like? What will my child feel?

Symptoms are often worse first thing in the morning. They can come and go over time. Your child might have some or all of the following:

- Crusty or sticky eyelashes when they wake up
- Red, puffy, or sore eyelids
- Eyes that feel itchy, burning, or gritty — like something is in the eye
- Watery eyes or eyes that feel very dry
- Sensitivity to bright lights — this is more common with BKC
- Lumps on the eyelid that keep coming back (these are called styes or chalazia)
- Eyelashes falling out
- Blurry vision

**⚠ Important for younger children:** If BKC is not treated, it can sometimes affect eyesight permanently in young children. This is because a child's brain is still learning to see clearly — if the eye is inflamed for a long time, the brain may stop developing proper connections with that eye (this is sometimes called a lazy eye). This is why it is so important to come to all your follow-up appointments, even when your child seems fine.

## How will the doctor check for it?

The doctor will look at your child's eyelids and eyes very carefully. They will probably use a special microscope called a slit lamp. This shines a thin beam of light and lets the doctor see the eyelids and front of the eye up close. It does not hurt at all.

No blood tests or scans are needed. The doctor will diagnose BKC by looking at the eyelids, the white of the eye, and the front surface of the eye. If the front of the eye is not yet affected, the doctor may say your child has 'suspected BKC' — which still means treatment is needed to stop it getting worse.

## Cleaning your eyelids — the most important thing you can do

Cleaning the eyelids every day is the single most important part of treatment. Even if your child is given eye drops or medicine, they still need to clean their eyelids too. Think of it like brushing your teeth — it needs to become part of the daily routine.

During a flare-up, do all 3 steps twice a day — morning and evening. Once things have settled, carry on doing it a few times a week to stop it coming back.

### 1 Step 1 — Warm compress (5 to 10 minutes)

- Boil some water and let it cool until it is warm but comfortable to touch — not hot.
- Soak a clean cotton pad or a clean folded flannel in the warm water. Hold it gently against your closed eyelids for 5 to 10 minutes.
- You can also buy a reusable heat mask from a pharmacy or optician. Warm it in the microwave, following the manufacturer's instructions, and place it over your closed eyes.
- Why? The warmth softens the blocked oil in your eyelid glands so it can flow out more easily.

### 2 Step 2 — Gentle massage (do this straight after the warm compress)

- While the eyelids are still warm, use a clean little finger to gently press and roll along each eyelid in small circles towards your lashes.
- This helps push the softened oil out of the glands so it can do its job of keeping your eye comfortable.

- It may feel a little uncomfortable at first, but this usually gets better with practice.

### 3 Step 3 — Clean the eyelid edges (wash your hands first)

- Use a cotton bud, a lint-free pad, or a ready-made eyelid wipe.
- Gently wipe along the edge of your upper and lower eyelids to remove any crustiness or oiliness.
- Always wash your hands before you do this.

## What can you use to clean your eyelids?

- Diluted baby shampoo — add one drop of gentle, unperfumed baby shampoo to a cup of cooled boiled water. Use a cotton bud or pad dipped in this to wipe along the eyelid edge.
- Bicarbonate of soda — dissolve half a teaspoon in a cup of cooled boiled water and use it the same way.
- Ready-made eyelid wipes or lotion (recommended) — these are specially made for cleaning eyelids and are less likely to irritate the eyes. Examples include Blephasol lotion, Blephaclean wipes, and Blephagel. You can buy these from pharmacies, online or from the opticians here at Manchester Royal Eye Hospital.
- Tea tree oil eyelid products — if the doctor thinks tiny mites on the lashes are causing a problem, they may suggest using a tea tree oil eyelid wipe or cleanser. Never use tea tree oil neat on the skin near the eyes — it must always be in a product made specially for use around the eyes.

## Medicines the doctor might give

If eyelid cleaning alone is not enough, the doctor may also prescribe medicines. These always work alongside the eyelid cleaning routine — not instead of it.

### Antibiotic cream or ointment (rubbed onto the eyelid)

- This helps reduce the number of bacteria on the eyelid. You apply a small amount along the eyelid edge after cleaning. Only use it for as long as the doctor says.

### Antibiotic medicine to take by mouth (tablet or liquid)

- For more severe cases, the doctor may prescribe an antibiotic to take by mouth. The most commonly used one for children is erythromycin — it helps to reduce bacteria and calm down the inflammation at the same time. Azithromycin is another option that works in a similar way.

- Older children (over 12) may sometimes be given a different antibiotic called doxycycline. This cannot be given to younger children as it can affect their growing teeth.
- These medicines can sometimes cause a tummy upset. Let your doctor know if this happens.

### **Anti-inflammatory eye drops (steroid drops)**

- These drops help to calm down redness and swelling — particularly if the front of the eye is affected. They are given in short courses, and the doctor will keep a close eye on your child while they use them, because using steroid drops for a long time without monitoring can occasionally cause problems such as raised pressure in the eye.

### **Lubricating eye drops (artificial tears)**

- These soothe dry, uncomfortable eyes. They are very safe and can be used as many times a day as needed. They do not contain any medicine.

### **Ciclosporin eye drops**

- These are special drops that help calm down inflammation in a different way to steroid drops and can be used for a longer time. They are usually used when other treatments are not working well enough. Your doctor will explain if your child needs these.

### **Other things that can help**

#### **Eating oily fish and healthy fats (omega-3)**

Omega-3 is a type of healthy fat that can help reduce inflammation and improve the way the oil glands in the eyelids work. Foods rich in omega-3 include oily fish like salmon, mackerel, sardines, and tuna, as well as walnuts, flaxseeds, and chia seeds. Ground flaxseed is a good child-friendly option — just sprinkle it on porridge, cereal, or yoghurt. You can also buy omega-3 or flaxseed oil supplements from most pharmacies.

#### **Vitamin D**

Research suggests that vitamin D may help with the oil glands in the eyelids and with reducing inflammation in the eye. Many children in the UK do not get enough vitamin D, especially in the winter months when there is less sunlight. The UK government recommends that all children aged 1 to 4 take a vitamin D supplement every day (10 micrograms, which may also be written as 400 IU). Ask your GP or pharmacist if your child should be taking one.

## Probiotics (live yoghurt and similar foods)

Some early research suggests that the health of the gut (digestive system) can affect inflammation in other parts of the body, including the eyes. Foods like live yoghurt and kefir contain helpful bacteria that may support the immune system. This is still being studied, but these foods are safe and healthy for children.

## Screen time

When we look at phones, tablets, or TVs, we naturally blink less often than usual. Blinking is important because it spreads a protective layer over the eye. Too little blinking can make dry eyes and eyelid problems worse. Try the 20-20-20 rule: every 20 minutes, look at something about 6 metres away (roughly the length of a classroom) for 20 seconds — and remind your child to blink normally during this time.

## School

It can help to let your child's school know about their condition. If bright lights cause discomfort, they may be able to sit away from windows or turn down classroom lighting. If your child's vision has been affected, they may be able to get some extra support too — your eye clinic can write a letter to the school if needed.

## Will it come back?

BKC is a long-term condition. Even after it gets better, it may still come back — especially if eyelid cleaning is stopped. About half of all children who get better do have a flare-up again at some point.

Think of eyelid cleaning like brushing your teeth — something you do regularly to keep problems away, not just when things are already bad. Some children need to carry on with it for months or even years.

- If symptoms come back and you have stopped cleaning — start again straight away.
- If symptoms come back and you are already cleaning regularly — contact your eye clinic for advice.

With good, regular eyelid care, most children with BKC can enjoy long periods with very few or no symptoms at all. Around 95% of children can reach a point where their condition is well controlled.

## When should I take my child to be seen urgently?

BKC is not usually an emergency. But please contact your eye clinic as soon as possible or contact the Emergency Eye Department via the hospital switchboard (0161) 276 1234 if the clinic is closed and your child has any of the following:

- A sudden increase in eye pain or redness that is much worse than usual
- Sudden blurry or reduced vision
- A new white or grey spot on the front of the eye
- Severe sensitivity to light that has come on suddenly
- The eye or eyelid swells up quickly

If things are changing gradually or you just have a question, please phone your eye clinic during normal working hours — there is no need to go to the Emergency Eye Department for routine blepharitis or BKC.

### Getting in touch

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Tel (0161) 701 4882 Monday – Friday 09.00 – 17.00