



COMMUNITY
EYE CARE
SPECIALISTS

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Iritis

The iris is the part of the eye you are looking at when you say a person has blue eyes or brown eyes. Its function is to change the size of the pupil (the round, black-looking opening in its center that allows light to enter the eye) by contracting or relaxing muscles that lie within it.

Iritis is an inflammation of the iris. It can occur in one eye or, less commonly, in both. Iritis is a serious condition, so do not treat it casually or ignore it, hoping it will go away by itself.

Symptoms

Sometimes there are no symptoms at all. Other times, an eye with iritis looks "bloodshot" and may be extremely uncomfortable in bright light. Sunlight or the glare of automobile headlights at night can even cause pain or aching in the eye or brow. The pain comes from the tightening of inflamed muscles as they constrict the pupil in bright light, and the red color comes from congestion of blood vessels on the outside surface of the eye, which is a reaction to the inflammation. There may also be some blurring of vision.

What causes Iritis?

Although there are many possible causes, most of the time the exact one cannot be identified. Iritis can occur independently or in association with inflammations elsewhere in the body, such as in the joints (arthritis or spine spondylitis), teeth or sinuses, or bowels (colitis). Usually it is not due to an infection, is not contagious, and is not related to the infectious "pink eye".

Why is Iritis serious?

If iritis is not treated promptly, there can be complications that threaten vision. These complications occur because the inflamed iris gets "sticky" and adheres to the lens, which lies directly behind it, or to the cornea, which is in front of it. The areas of stickiness, called 'synechiae', can be dangerous because they might block the normal channels for fluid flow within the eye and lead to secondary glaucoma, a serious condition that can lead to blindness. Other complications of iritis are cataracts, retinal swelling, and other internal eye damage.

If the iritis is severe, the intraocular muscles must be rested and the pupils must be kept dilated (enlarged) with cycloplegic eye drops. These help relieve much of the pain because they allow the iris and the other intraocular muscle (called the ciliary body) to rest by preventing their normal constriction, especially in bright light; the dilation also keeps the iris away from the lens and cornea so that synechiae and scarring are less likely to form. If synechiae are already present, the dilation may pull free those that are not firmly attached. Even through cycloplegic drops blur your vision, which can be annoying and make it difficult to see well enough to read or even drive a car, they are very important and should not be discontinued until you have been told that it is safe to do so.

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Other treatment includes steroid eye drops or oral agents. If the iritis is severe and does not respond well to the medication, you may need steroid injections given under the conjunctiva (membrane overlying the eyeball), or steroid pills, which must be taken exactly as directed to help reduce serious side effects.

Medications may produce very rapid relief at first, but the complete control of an iritis attack tends to be a slow process. As the inflammation subsides, you will be given instructions for reducing the medications gradually. This is important. Stopping treatment suddenly could result in a flare-up of the attack.

Recurrence

An iritis attack may be completely cleared by treatment and never occur again, or it may recur in the same eye or in the other eye. Once you have had iritis, a red eye, even years later, could indicate another attack. If at any time you think an attack may be starting, call for an appointment right away. Be sure to tell any other doctor who is treating you for any type of eye problem that you have a history of iritis.

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Self-treatment is not wise and you should seek medical attention. However, if you can't get medical help right away you may, for a day or two, begin using the cycloplegic eye drops you used for your last attack. But it is generally not a good idea to use eye drops that have been in the medicine cabinet for a long time – they may have lost their potency or worse, they may have become contaminated with bacteria. Because of the possibility of side effects, you should never take steroids without medical supervision.