Herpes Keratitis

What is herpes keratitis?

Herpes keratitis is a viral infection of the eye caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). There are two major types of the virus:

- **Type I** is the most common and primarily infects the face, causing the familiar "cold sore" or "fever blister."
- **Type II** is the sexually transmitted form of herpes, infecting the genitals.

While both Type I and Type II herpes can spread to the eye and cause infection, Type I is by far the most frequent cause of eye infections. Infection can be transferred to the eye by touching an active lesion (a cold sore or blister) and then your eye.

What causes herpes keratitis?

Type I herpes is very contagious and is commonly transmitted by skin contact with someone who has the virus. Almost everyone — about 90 percent of the population — is exposed to Type I herpes, usually during childhood.

After the original infection, the virus lies in a dormant state, living in nerve cells of the skin or eye. Reactivation can be triggered in a number of ways, including:

- stress
- sun exposure or other UV light exposure (such as tanning beds)
- fever
- trauma to the body (such as injury or surgery)
- menstruation
- certain medications

Once herpes simplex is present in the eye, it typically infects the eyelids, conjunctiva and cornea. It may also infect the inside of the eye; however, this is much less common.

Eye Words to Know

Conjunctiva: Clear tissue covering the white part of your eye and the inside of your eyelids.

Cornea: Clear, dome-shaped window of the front of your eye. It focuses light into your eye.

What are herpes keratitis symptoms?

The symptoms of herpes keratitis may include pain, redness, rash, blurred vision, tearing, discharge and sensitivity to light.

If the infection is superficial, involving only the cornea's outer layer (called the epithelium), it will usually heal without scarring. However, if it involves the deeper layers of cornea (which can happen after time), the infection may lead to scarring of the cornea, loss of vision and sometimes even blindness.

Left untreated, herpes keratitis can severely damage your eye.

How is herpes keratitis treated?

Treatment of herpes keratitis depends on its severity. Mild infection is typically treated with topical and sometimes oral antiviral medication. Your ophthalmologist may gently scrape the affected area of the cornea to remove the diseased cells. In case of severe scarring and vision loss, a corneal transplant may be required.

It is very important to consult an ophthalmologist before beginning any treatment, because some medications or eyedrops may actually make the infection worse.

There is no complete cure for herpes; once the virus is in the body, you cannot get rid of it. However, if you develop herpes keratitis, there are some things you can do to help prevent recurring outbreaks:

- If you have an active cold sore or blister, avoid touching your eyes.
- Steroids can increase the herpes virus in the body. You should not use steroid eye drops unless you are taking an anti-viral medicine as well.
- Stop wearing contact lenses if you keep getting infections.
- See an ophthalmologist immediately if symptoms of ocular herpes return.

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Summary

Herpes keratitis is a viral infection of the eye caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). The infection can be transferred to the eye by touching an active lesion (a cold sore or blister) and then your eye.

Almost everyone is exposed to the HSV during childhood. After the original infection, it lies dormant but can be triggered by stress, fever, trauma to the body and certain medications. Once in the eye, it usually infects the eyelids, the conjunctiva, and the cornea. Symptoms of herpes keratitis include pain, redness, blurred vision and sensitivity to light. Herpes keratitis can damage your eye and cause loss of vision if left untreated.

Treatment of herpes keratitis includes antiviral medication and corneal scraping or corneal transplant for severe cases.

If you have any questions about your eyes or your vision, speak with your ophthalmologist. He or she is committed to protecting your sight.

Get more information about herpes from EyeSmart—provided by the American Academy of Ophthalmology—at **aao.org/herpes-link**.

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