SYMPTOM

Swollen eyes

Swollen eyes are puffiness or enlargement of the eyelids or tissues around one or both eyes.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Puffy, heavy, tight, itchy, or tender eyelids

WHERE IT IS FELT
Eyelids and skin around one or both eyes

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Allergies, irritated eyelids, styes

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Vision changes, severe pain, fever, or painful eye movement

USUALLY LASTS
Hours to days, but longer with ongoing inflammation

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Swelling persists, recurs, or comes with discharge or a lump

Overview

"Swollen eyes" usually means swelling of the eyelids or the soft tissue around the eyes. The eyeball itself may not be swollen. The medical term for swelling around the eye is periorbital swelling .

Swelling can affect the upper eyelid, lower eyelid, or both. It may appear on one side or around both eyes. It can develop suddenly, such as after contact with an allergen, or gradually because of an eyelid condition.

Many causes are minor and improve with simple care. However, swelling with vision changes, severe pain, fever, or pain when moving the eye needs prompt medical assessment.

What it may feel or look like

The eyelids may look puffy or partly closed. The skin can remain its usual colour or become red, darker, or bruised. Depending on the cause, you may also notice:

A visibly bulging eye is different from simple eyelid puffiness. Bulging, reduced eye movement,

double vision, or pain when looking around should be assessed urgently.

- Itching, watering, burning, or a gritty feeling
- Tenderness or warmth around the eyelid
- A small, painful or painless eyelid lump
- Crusting along the eyelashes
- Sticky, watery, or pus-like discharge
- Swelling elsewhere on the face

Common causes

Common causes

Allergies often cause itchy, watery eyes with swelling on both sides. Triggers can include pollen, animals, dust mites, cosmetics, or skin-care products. Rubbing the eyes can make the swelling worse.

Blepharitis is inflammation along the eyelid edges. It may cause redness, irritation, flakes or crusts around the eyelashes, and swelling that returns.

A stye is a tender, red lump caused by inflammation or infection in an eyelid gland. A chalazion is a blocked eyelid gland that usually forms a firmer, less painful lump.

Conjunctivitis is inflammation of the thin membrane covering the white of the eye and inner eyelids. It may result from viruses, bacteria, allergies, or irritation. Redness, watering, itching, or discharge may occur with swelling.

Crying, poor sleep, salty meals, and normal fluid movement during sleep can cause mild puffiness, especially under both eyes in the morning.

Less common causes

An insect bite, minor injury, contact-lens irritation, or a reaction to medicine may cause swelling. Skin conditions such as eczema can also affect the eyelids.

Persistent swelling around both eyes can sometimes be related to thyroid, kidney, heart, or other conditions that affect fluid balance. These usually cause other symptoms and require an assessment rather than being identified from eye swelling alone.

Urgent causes

Cellulitis is a bacterial infection of the skin and deeper tissues. Infection behind the eyelid, called orbital cellulitis, can affect vision and eye movement. Warning signs include fever,

worsening redness, severe tenderness, a bulging eye, reduced vision, or pain when moving the eye.

A serious allergic reaction can cause rapid swelling of the eyelids, lips, tongue, or throat. Breathing or swallowing problems make this an emergency.

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if swelling occurs with trouble breathing, throat or tongue swelling, faintness, confusion, or rapidly worsening facial swelling.

Seek urgent medical care now if you have:

After chemical exposure, remove contact lenses if they come out easily and rinse the eye continuously with clean, lukewarm water while arranging urgent help.

Book a routine appointment if swelling lasts more than a few days, keeps returning, or is getting worse. You should also arrange an assessment for a persistent eyelid lump, ongoing discharge, recurrent crusting, or swelling elsewhere in your body.

- Sudden loss or marked reduction of vision
- Severe eye pain or pain when moving the eye
- A bulging eye, double vision, or limited eye movement
- Fever with a red, hot, or increasingly swollen eyelid
- Swelling after a significant eye injury
- Chemical exposure to the eye

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the swelling started, whether it affects one or both eyes, and whether you have itching, pain, discharge, fever, injury, or vision changes. Mention new cosmetics, medicines, eye drops, contact lenses, and possible allergy triggers.

They may examine the eyelids, eye surface, pupils, vision, and eye movements. The pattern often helps narrow the possibilities. For example, itching on both sides may fit an allergic cause, while a local tender lump may fit a stye.

Blood tests or imaging are not needed for most mild cases. They may be arranged if there are signs of a deeper infection, thyroid disease, or another condition affecting the whole body.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause. For mild puffiness or allergy-related swelling, a cool, clean compress may soothe the area. Avoid rubbing your eyes and pause any new cosmetics or skin products that may be responsible.

For a stye or blocked eyelid gland, a warm compress can encourage drainage. Do not squeeze or pierce an eyelid lump. Gentle eyelid cleaning may help if crusting or blepharitis is present.

Remove contact lenses until redness, discharge, and swelling have settled and the cause is clear. Do not share towels, cosmetics, eye drops, or contact-lens equipment when an infection may be present.

A pharmacist or clinician can advise whether an antihistamine or lubricating eye drop is suitable. Antibiotics only help certain bacterial infections. Steroid eye drops should be used only when prescribed because they can worsen some eye conditions. Do not use leftover prescription drops.

Cellulitis and serious allergic reactions require medical treatment rather than home care.

What to expect

Mild morning puffiness or irritation may settle within hours. Allergy-related swelling can improve after the trigger is removed, although it may return with further exposure. Styes and chalazia often take longer to resolve.

The swelling should generally become less noticeable rather than steadily worsen. Arrange follow-up if symptoms persist, return often, or do not improve as expected. New pain, fever, vision changes, or difficulty moving the eye changes the situation and needs urgent assessment.

Common questions

Is a swollen eyelid contagious?

Swelling itself is not contagious. Some viral or bacterial causes of conjunctivitis can spread between people. Handwashing and avoiding shared towels or cosmetics can reduce this risk.

Can lack of sleep cause swollen eyes?

Poor sleep can contribute to mild puffiness, especially under both eyes. It should not usually cause severe pain, marked redness, fever, or vision changes.

Should I use a warm or cold compress?

A cool compress may help itching, allergies, or general puffiness. A warm compress is usually more useful for a stye, chalazion, or crusted eyelid edges. Use a clean cloth and avoid temperatures that could burn the skin.

Why is only one eye swollen?

One-sided swelling may result from a stye, blocked gland, insect bite, injury, local reaction, or infection. The appearance alone cannot confirm the cause. Seek prompt care if it is painful, rapidly worsening, or affecting vision or eye movement.

Sources

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