Meibomian cyst (chalazion)

What is a meibomian cyst?

The sebaceous glands in the eyelids are called meibomian glands. They produce the greasy part of the tears which stop them evaporating away too quickly.

Sometimes a meibomian gland gets blocked and then swells up because the grease cannot get out. A firm, round lump forms in the lid, which resembles a hailstone and this is a meibomian cyst. Sometimes the meibomian cyst is called a chalazion (ka-lay-zee-on), which is the Greek word for hailstone.

Often the blocked gland becomes inflamed or infected and the meibomian cyst will be red and sore. The cyst may press on the eye and blur the vision a little. Sometimes the cyst will burst through the skin or through the lining of the eyelid.

What surgery is required for a meibomian cyst?

Meibomian cysts will very often get better by themselves after several months. If it does not, a minor operation called “Incision and Curettage” (I&C) can help. The surgery only takes a few minutes:

You are asked to lie down on a couch in the operating room. Local anaesthetic drops are put in your eyes to numb them. The eyelids are cleaned with an iodine-containing antiseptic solution. Local anaesthetic is injected into the lid which stings for 10-20 seconds. After this the lid is numb. A small cut is made on the inside of the eyelid and the contents of the cyst are scooped out. In most cases the contents of the cyst are discarded. Occasionally the contents of the cyst are sent to the pathology laboratory for microscopic checks to make sure that it is harmless; this is a “biopsy”.

At the end of the operation antibiotic ointment is put in the eye and an eye pad is put on. You will be given the ointment to use at home, usually three times a day for one week. Usually no more appointments are required.

What happens after the operation?

After the operation you can take the eye pad off after about 2 hours. You may find some blood and discharge in and around your eye. This is quite normal and can be removed by bathing the lids gently with cool boiled water. Once the anaesthetic solution has worn off you may have a little discomfort for a day or so. You can take paracetamol tablets if necessary. The eyelid may look bruised and swollen for a few weeks after the operation. You should not wear contact lenses until the eye feels normal again.

You should not drive home after the operation so please come to hospital by public transport or arrange for someone to drive you home.
Rarely the cyst may seem to persist after the operation. Usually this is because another one has started to form. In this case you should contact the hospital and arrangements will be made to see you again.

**What happens if my child has a meibomian cyst?**

In children surgery is done under general anaesthetic as a day case. Your child will need to be checked at a pre-assessment visit, a short while before the operation, to make sure that they are fit and well for the anaesthetic. It is best to postpone the surgery if your child is even slightly unwell eg. a cough and cold. You will be told when to stop giving food and drink before the operation. It is often worth waiting a little to see if your child’s cyst will get better on its own so that a general anaesthetic can be avoided.

**Will I sign a consent form?**

You will be asked to sign a consent form before the operation. The doctor will also sign it. For children, a parent or legal guardian will need to come to hospital to sign the form with the doctor. The consent form is a permanent record to show that the operation and the type of anaesthetic to be given have been discussed with you. You will be given a copy of the form.

When you sign the consent form you are indicating that you wish the operation to go ahead. If you are not happy with anything on the form you should not sign it until you have had your worries discussed and resolved.

**How do I prevent further meibomian cysts?**

Sometimes a cyst will develop because of an underlying lid or skin problem e.g. blepharitis, acne. Treating this condition may help to prevent further cysts developing.

**What should I do if a meibomian cyst occurs again?**

If you feel another cyst is developing, use hot flannels on your eyelid or hold your closed eye over a bowl of steaming hot water. This helps the pores in the eyelid to open up and for the grease to drain out. Take care not to burn your eyelid with the hot water. Do this several times a day, for a few days.

Brolene ointment from your chemist or antibiotic ointment from your doctor will help to reduce infection in and around the cyst. If you have several cysts and have blepharitis, tetracycline tablets from your doctor may help them to clear.

There is no need to go to Eye Casualty with these cysts. At least half of all cysts will clear without surgery. If after a few weeks a cyst is still bothering you, you can ask your GP to refer you to the Eye Unit.

For a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8079 4688.

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