CONDITION

Hordeolum

A hordeolum is a painful red lump caused by an inflamed or infected eyelid gland.

WHAT IT IS
Painful inflammation or infection of an eyelid gland

BODY SYSTEM
Eyes and eyelids

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Tender eyelid lump, redness, swelling, watering

WHAT CAUSES IT
Usually bacterial infection of a blocked eyelid gland

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Eyelid examination and vision check

MAIN TREATMENT
Warm compresses and eyelid hygiene

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes, most clear with simple care

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes, if vision changes or infection spreads

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Usually clears within days to weeks

Overview

A hordeolum is a small, painful lump on the eyelid. It is often called a stye. It develops when an oil-producing gland or an eyelash follicle becomes inflamed, usually because of a bacterial infection.

An external hordeolum forms near the eyelash line. It may look like a pimple with a yellow or white point. An internal hordeolum forms deeper inside the eyelid when a meibomian gland becomes inflamed. Meibomian glands make part of the oily layer that prevents tears from drying too quickly.

Most hordeola are uncomfortable but not dangerous. They often drain and settle with warm compresses and gentle eyelid care. A deeper internal hordeolum may be more painful and take longer to clear.

A hordeolum is not the same as a chalazion. A chalazion is a firm lump caused by a blocked oil gland and is usually less painful. A hordeolum can sometimes leave a chalazion behind after the infection and tenderness have settled.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually develop over a short period, often within a day or two. They usually affect one small area of one eyelid.

Common symptoms include:

An internal hordeolum may cause more widespread swelling because the inflamed gland is deeper in the eyelid. The lump may be easier to see when the eyelid is gently turned outward, but you should not force the eyelid or press on the area.

A straightforward hordeolum should not cause loss of vision, bulging of the eye, or severe pain when moving the eye. Those symptoms need prompt medical assessment because they may indicate another condition or infection extending beyond the eyelid.

- A red, tender lump on the upper or lower eyelid
- Local eyelid swelling
- Pain or sensitivity when the area is touched
- A small yellow or white point near an eyelash
- Watering or a gritty feeling in the eye
- Crusting along the eyelid edge
- Sensitivity to bright light in some cases

Causes and risk factors

Most hordeola are linked to bacteria, commonly Staphylococcus aureus . These bacteria often live harmlessly on the skin and around the nose. A hordeolum can form when bacteria enter an eyelash follicle or a blocked eyelid gland.

You may be more likely to develop one if you have:

A hordeolum itself is not usually passed directly from one person to another. However, the bacteria involved can be transferred on fingers, towels, cosmetics, or contact lens equipment.

Repeated eyelid lumps may have an underlying cause such as blepharitis or rosacea. Rarely, a persistent or repeatedly returning lump in the same place can be another eyelid condition and

may need closer examination.

- Blepharitis, which is long-term inflammation along the eyelid edges
- Meibomian gland dysfunction, where eyelid oil glands become blocked
- Rosacea, a condition that can affect facial skin and the eyes
- A previous hordeolum or chalazion
- Diabetes, particularly when blood glucose is not well controlled
- Frequent rubbing or touching of the eyes
- Eye makeup or contact lens habits that introduce bacteria to the eyelids

Diagnosis

A healthcare professional can usually diagnose a hordeolum by looking at the eyelid and asking how the symptoms began. Laboratory tests and scans are not normally needed.

The examination may include checking:

These checks help distinguish a hordeolum from a chalazion, blepharitis, an infected tear sac, or cellulitis. Cellulitis means an infection spreading through the tissues around the eye.

If the lump does not clear, keeps returning in the same location, or has an unusual appearance, an eye specialist may recommend further assessment. In uncommon cases, a small tissue sample may be taken to rule out another type of eyelid growth.

- Where the lump sits in relation to the eyelashes
- Whether it is tender, red, or draining
- How much of the eyelid is swollen
- Your eyesight and eye movements
- Whether redness extends into the surrounding face

Treatment and management

Many hordeola improve without a procedure. Warmth encourages the blocked gland to open and drain.

A clean, warm compress can be held gently against the closed eyelid for about 10 to 15 minutes at a time, several times during the day. It should feel comfortably warm, not hot enough to burn. Use a clean cloth each time and wash your hands before and afterward.

Do not squeeze, puncture, or try to pop the lump. This can injure the eyelid or push infection into nearby tissue. Avoid rubbing the eye.

It is sensible to stop wearing eye makeup and contact lenses until the eyelid has healed. Makeup can irritate the area, and contact lenses may become contaminated or feel uncomfortable. Do not share towels, face cloths, cosmetics, or eye-care products.

Antibiotic eye ointment or drops are not needed for every hordeolum. They may be considered when there is drainage, infection along the eyelid edge, or another bacterial eye problem. Because an internal hordeolum sits deep inside the lid, antibiotic drops may not reach it effectively.

Antibiotic tablets may be used if infection has spread into the surrounding eyelid or facial tissue. Medication choice depends on the location and extent of infection, allergies, local bacterial resistance, and other health factors.

If a hordeolum is large, very painful, or not improving, an eye specialist may make a small opening so it can drain. This should not be attempted at home. A persistent lump that has become a chalazion may require different treatment.

If blepharitis or meibomian gland dysfunction is contributing, ongoing eyelid cleaning and management of the underlying condition may reduce future episodes.

Complications

Most hordeola heal without lasting damage. Possible complications include:

Orbital cellulitis is a deeper infection behind the tissues that separate the eyelid from the eye socket. It is uncommon but serious. Warning signs include painful or restricted eye movement, a bulging eye, reduced vision, double vision, severe headache, or marked illness.

- A chalazion left behind after pain and redness settle
- Repeated hordeola
- Temporary eyelid swelling that blurs vision by pressing on the eye
- Preseptal cellulitis, an infection of the eyelid and tissue in front of the eye socket
- Scarring or eyelash changes after severe or repeated inflammation

Prevention

Not every hordeolum can be prevented. Some develop even with careful hygiene, especially

when eyelid glands tend to become blocked.

You may lower the chance of another episode by washing your hands before touching your eyes and avoiding unnecessary eye rubbing. Remove eye makeup gently before sleeping, do not share cosmetics, and replace products that may have become contaminated.

If you wear contact lenses, follow the cleaning, replacement, and handwashing instructions provided for your lenses. Do not use saliva or tap water to wet lenses.

Regular eyelid care may help if you have blepharitis or meibomian gland dysfunction. This often involves warm compresses and gentle cleaning of the eyelid edges, based on advice from an eye-care professional. Managing rosacea or diabetes may also reduce factors linked to repeated hordeola.

Living with it and what to expect

A small external hordeolum often develops a visible point, drains, and improves over several days. Full settling may take one to two weeks. Internal hordeola can take longer because they are deeper and may not drain toward the skin.

Pain and tenderness should gradually decrease. A firm, less painful lump can remain after the acute inflammation has gone. This is often a chalazion rather than continuing infection, and it may fade slowly over weeks or months.

A hordeolum does not usually damage the eye or permanently affect vision. You can generally continue normal activities if you feel well, although makeup and contact lenses should be avoided while symptoms are active.

Some people have only one episode. Others develop repeated lumps, particularly when they have ongoing eyelid inflammation or blocked oil glands. Recurrent episodes may improve when the underlying eyelid condition is managed, but future hordeola cannot always be prevented.

A lump that repeatedly appears in exactly the same place, loses its eyelashes, bleeds, changes shape, or does not heal should be examined rather than managed indefinitely at home.

When to get medical help

Arrange routine medical or eye-care advice if:

Seek urgent same-day medical care if redness or swelling spreads across the eyelid or into the cheek, or if you develop fever or feel generally unwell. These symptoms may suggest cellulitis

and can require antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline .

Seek emergency care for reduced vision, double vision, a bulging eye, severe headache, vomiting, confusion, or pain or difficulty when moving the eye. These are not typical features of a simple hordeolum and need rapid assessment.

- The lump is not beginning to improve after several days of warm compresses
- It remains after a few weeks
- Pain or swelling is getting worse
- The eyelid is swollen shut
- Hordeola keep returning
- A lump repeatedly develops in the same place
- You have diabetes or a weakened immune system and symptoms are worsening

Common questions

Is a hordeolum the same as a stye?

Yes. Hordeolum is the medical term for a stye. An external hordeolum forms near an eyelash, while an internal hordeolum develops in a deeper eyelid oil gland.

Can I pop a hordeolum?

No. Squeezing or piercing it can damage the eyelid and spread infection. Warm compresses allow it to drain more safely. A healthcare professional can drain a persistent or severe hordeolum when needed.

Is a hordeolum contagious?

The lump itself is not usually considered contagious. However, bacteria from the eyelid can spread through unwashed hands, shared towels, cosmetics, or contact lens equipment. Handwashing and avoiding shared personal items reduce this risk.

How long does a hordeolum last?

Many begin improving within several days and clear within one or two weeks. A deeper internal hordeolum may last longer. A painless lump that remains afterward may be a chalazion.

Why do I keep getting hordeola?

Repeated hordeola can be linked to blepharitis, blocked meibomian glands, rosacea, diabetes, or frequent eye touching. Repeated lumps in the same location should be assessed to confirm the cause.

Can a hordeolum affect my eyesight?

A typical hordeolum does not damage vision. A large swollen eyelid may cause temporary blurring by pressing on the eye or disturbing the tear film. Reduced vision, double vision, or painful eye movement needs urgent assessment.

Sources

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