Allergic conditions of the eye

Derrick Smit, MBChB, Dip Ophth(SA), FC Ophth(SA), MMed(Ophth)(Stell)
Department of Ophthalmology, Faculty of Health Sciences, Stellenbosch University, Tygerberg Hospital

Introduction
Allergic conditions affecting the eye present to pharmacists and other primary healthcare providers on a daily basis. It is important to note that many of these conditions are transient in nature and do not cause any permanent damage to the eye whereas other more chronic forms are vision-threatening and may lead to irreversible ocular damage if misdiagnosed and not treated appropriately.

In this article, the different guises of ocular allergy will be described along with helpful hints that will aid in the correct diagnosis and management of each. Conditions predominantly affecting the eyelids will be discussed first, followed by those primarily affecting the ocular surface and finally those associated with contact lens wear.

Allergic conditions affecting the eyelids

Allergic contact dermatitis
These allergic reactions may be triggered by topical application of medications and cosmetics or by substances originating from the environment. The reactions may manifest acutely as a form of anaphylaxis or may have a delayed onset where symptoms and signs manifest 24–72 hours after exposure to the allergen. The delayed response requires prior sensitisation to the substance in question and patients are often able to recall previous exposure to this agent. Patients with acute allergy may rarely show signs of systemic anaphylaxis such as laboured or rapid breathing and increased heart rate and in such cases they would require urgent referral to a medical emergency unit.

Clinical picture (Figure 1)
Acute reaction
• Develops within minutes after exposure to the allergen
• Itching, redness (erythema) and swelling of the eyelids
• Erythema and chemosis (swelling) of the conjunctiva

Delayed reaction
• Develops 24–72 hours after re-exposure to the offending agent
• Erythema, leathery thickening and scaling of the eyelids in the early stages
• Hyperpigmentation and scarring of the eyelid skin later on
• Conjunctival erythema and mucoid discharge often present

Management
1. Identification and discontinuation of the causative agent is the mainstay of treatment and appropriate advice should therefore be given if the history clearly identifies the cause. If, however, the cause is uncertain, the patient should be referred to a medical practitioner suitably trained to diagnose and treat allergic conditions (allergist).
2. In most acute cases, antigen withdrawal and supportive treatment with cold compresses and artificial tears will suffice. Adjunctive treatment with topical and/or oral antihistamines may be required in cases not responding to simpler measures.
3. Most mild delayed reactions will also respond to antigen withdrawal and simple supportive measures as outlined above. More severe cases may require topical application of corticosteroids to the eyelids and eye and this should only take place under medical supervision.

Atopic dermatitis
Atopic dermatitis usually manifests in infancy or early childhood in individuals who have a personal or family history of other atopic conditions such as asthma, hay fever or allergic rhinitis. The disease is characterised by chronic, pruritic (itchy) skin lesions that typically affect the face and extensor surfaces in infants and young children while later affecting the joint flexures in adolescents and adults.
Clinical picture
The skin lesions differ in appearance in different age groups.
- In infants: Pruritic, erythematous rash on the face and extensor surfaces
- In children: Similar to above but with secondary lichenification (thickening of the skin) due to constant scratching
- In adults: Red, scaly, pruritic patches with dry, thickened and wrinkled skin (Figure 2)

Management
1. Reduction of exposure to environmental allergens is once again a key aspect in managing these patients. The patient should be advised to consult an allergist to identify the allergen(s) in question and provide expert counselling regarding the overall management of the condition.
2. Oral antihistamines may be given to alleviate itching while emollient creams can be used to soften the skin and improve hydration.
3. Topical corticosteroid creams or ointments are often needed to control acute lesions but these should only be dispensed under medical supervision since local absorption from the eyelids may lead to raised intraocular pressure in steroid-sensitive patients.

Allergic conditions affecting the ocular surface

Allergic conjunctivitis (seasonal and perennial)
These conditions typically occur in response to airborne allergens that come into contact with mast cells in the conjunctiva. The mast cells subsequently release histamine and various other chemical mediators that cause dilation of blood vessels and swelling of the conjunctiva. If an individual was previously sensitised to the specific allergen it may take only a few minutes for the clinical picture to develop. Patients with allergic conjunctivitis often suffer from other forms of atopy such as asthma or allergic rhinitis.

Clinical picture (Figure 3)
- Sudden onset of intense ocular itching is characteristic
- Swelling of the eyelids and conjunctiva
- Conjunctival redness/ hyperaemia
- Mucoid discharge from the eyes and nose

Management
Prevention forms an important part of the management of this condition by avoiding or, at least, reducing exposure to known allergens. However, once the clinical picture is present, the treatment should be based on the severity of the patient’s symptoms.

1. Cold compresses may be all that is required in mild forms of the disease. Ice packs should never be applied directly to the eyelids but rather be covered by a protective layer such as a facecloth.
2. Artificial tears, especially when chilled, provide symptomatic relief in mild cases and also serve to dilute and flush away allergens and inflammatory mediators from the surface of the eye. Preservative free preparations such as carmiloze in single dose vials (e.g. Cellufresh® or Celluvisc®) may be preferable.
3. Topical vasoconstrictors, such as naphazoline and tetryzoline are sometimes used alone or in combination with antihistamines such as antazoline (e.g. Spersallerg®) to provide short-term symptomatic relief. Prolonged use may however lead to rebound conjunctival hyperaemia which often takes a long time to clear and explains why most ophthalmologists prefer not to use these medications.
4. Topical antihistamines, such as emedastine and levocabastine, are useful to provide quick relief from the symptoms of allergic conjunctivitis. Oral antihistamines, i.e. selective H1-receptor antagonists may also alleviate ocular symptoms.
5. Topical mast-cell stabilisers, such as sodium chromoglycate and lodoxamide, play a predominantly preventative role and are therefore used more frequently in chronic allergic conditions.
6. Topical medications with both antihistamine and mast-cell stabilising properties, such as olopatadine and ketotifen, are popular choices since they quickly relieve symptoms but also help to prevent recurring episodes of ocular itching.
7. Other medications, such as topical non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) or topical corticosteroids, may be required in specific cases but if a patient does not respond adequately to the above options it is important to refer the patient for medical attention.

Vernal keratoconjunctivitis (VKC)
Vernal keratoconjunctivitis or spring catarrh is a bilateral inflammation of the cornea and conjunctiva that often flares up during springtime although in hotter climates patients experience symptoms throughout the year. It most commonly occurs in young boys who often have either a personal or family history of atopy. Most patients who suffer from VKC fortunately outgrow the condition during puberty.

Clinical picture
Symptoms include
- Severe, chronic ocular itching
- Sensitivity to light (photophobia) and inability to open the eyes due to discomfort (blepharospasm)
- Blurred vision
- Mucoid discharge
Signs tend to occur either under the upper eyelid (palpebral form) or around the cornea (limbal form).

- In the palpebral form, giant papillae may form on the conjunctiva under the upper eyelid (Figure 4). This form is commonly seen in less pigmented individuals living in cooler climates.
- In the limbal form, a thickened, gelatinous ring may form around the cornea which often contains whitish dots called Trantas dots (Figure 5). This form frequently occurs in more pigmented patients who live in hotter climates.

If treatment is inadequate, progressive corneal damage may eventually lead to blindness.

**Management**

Treatment should, once again, be based on the severity of the patient’s symptoms as well as the degree of ocular surface disease. An increase in severity usually equates to an increase in the number of different drugs required to adequately control the disease.

1. In mild cases, topical antihistamines and artificial tear drops usually provide sufficient control.
2. In moderate cases, long-term administration of a topical mast-cell stabiliser is required in addition to topical anti-histamines and lubricants. Oral antihistamines are also useful to decrease the severity of itching.
3. Severe cases often need short courses of topical corticosteroids such as prednisolone acetate or dexamethasone phosphate in addition to the drugs listed above in order to gain control of the disease. These drugs should only be used under specialist supervision since raised intraocular pressure and even cataracts may result from indiscriminate use.
4. Topical preparations of immunomodulatory drugs such as cyclosporine and tacrolimus are also used in the most severe cases under strict specialist supervision.

**Atopic keratoconjunctivitis (AKC)**

Up to two thirds of patients with atopic dermatitis develop ocular involvement with AKC occurring most commonly. Like VKC, it is a chronic, bilateral inflammation of the cornea and conjunctiva and the two conditions therefore share some common clinical characteristics on the one hand but also show significant differences on the other.

**Clinical picture**

Similarities to VKC include:
- Itching as the major symptom
- Mucoid discharge, blurred vision and photophobia also present

Differences from VKC include:
- No gender or geographic predilection
- Perennial disease more common with minimal seasonal exacerbation. Exacerbations are more common in the presence of animals.
- Usually presents from the second decade onwards i.e. it starts when most VKC patients begin to outgrow their disease
- Giant papillae are usually not present on the conjunctiva
- The conjunctiva often shows “milky” swelling
- Significant scarring and neovascularisation of the cornea may occur which often leads to blindness if not managed correctly (Figure 6)

**Management**

1. *Reduction of exposure to environmental allergens* (same as for atopic dermatitis).
2. *Oral antihistamines* (same as for atopic dermatitis).
3. *Topical antihistamines*, such as levocabastine and emedastine, help to alleviate symptoms and may be required long-term.
4. *Topical mast-cell stabilisers*, such as sodium chromoglycate and lodoxamide, reduce itching and tearing. Drugs that have an antihistamine effect in addition to mast-cell stabilisation, such as olopatadine and ketotifen, are also very useful. These agents may be needed on a chronic basis in patients with perennial symptoms.
5. *Topical immunomodulatory drugs*, such as corticosteroids and cyclosporine, are often required in patients who do not respond adequately to more conservative measures. These drugs should only be dispensed under specialist supervision.

**Contact lens-induced conjunctivitis**

Contact lens wear may be associated with different types of conjunctivitis. These are either caused by an allergic reaction to contact lens solution (contact lens allergy) or by mechanical rubbing of the contact lens against the conjunctiva combined with long-term exposure to proteins on the surface of the contact lens (giant papillary conjunctivitis).


**Contact lens allergy**

The clinical picture of contact lens allergy is very similar to that of seasonal allergic conjunctivitis (SAC) since it is characterised by ocular itching, erythema, chemosis and tearing. The distinction lies in the history of contact lens wear in these patients as opposed to one of atopy and seasonal exacerbation in patients suffering from SAC. The condition is self-limiting and resolves once the offending solution is withdrawn.

**Giant papillary conjunctivitis (GPC)**

**Clinical picture**

Giant papillary conjunctivitis closely resembles vernal keratoconjunctivitis (VKC) but, once again, with the exception that it occurs in contact lens wearers as opposed to atopic patients. Wearers of soft contact lenses are affected more often than those wearing rigid contact lenses.

**Symptoms** therefore include:
- Varying degrees of itching
- Foreign body sensation
- Mucus covering the contact lenses

**Signs** include:
- Limited conjunctival injection
- Giant papillae under the upper eyelid, identical in appearance to those seen in VKC

**Management**

The aim of treatment in GPC is to resolve symptoms and thereby, if possible, enable the patient to continue wearing contact lenses.

1. **Reducing the amount of contact time** between the conjunctiva and the contact lens is the most important step in managing this condition.
2. **Changing the disinfection system** to use hydrogen peroxide and preservative-free solutions instead of heat or preserved chemicals is preferred.
3. **Frequent enzymatic cleaning of the lenses** i.e. at least once a week will help remove the instigating proteins from the lens surface.
4. **Referral to a registered contact lens practitioner** to optimise both lens type and fit is often necessary. Daily disposable lenses are preferred for patients with GPC.
5. **Pharmacological intervention is less important** in the treatment of GPC if compared to other forms of ocular allergy. Sodium chromoglycate may be useful in early cases but often short courses of topical corticosteroids are required to bring symptoms under control. Once again, these drugs should only be dispensed under medical supervision.

**Conclusion**

Allergic conditions affecting the eyes and eyelids can present in many different ways and thus it is important that the primary healthcare provider possesses an adequate understanding of these conditions. Considerable overlap may occur with regard to presenting signs and symptoms but often the correct diagnosis can be made by simply asking a few pertinent questions regarding matters such as atopic history and contact lens wear.

Many of these conditions will resolve either spontaneously or with conservative intervention whereas others may be exceptionally difficult to treat and have the potential to cause significant loss of vision. Figure 7 demonstrates a stepwise approach that may be used in the treatment of most forms of ocular allergy and reiterates that the same process should be followed for all patients. By initially reducing antigen exposure and then judiciously adding different medications depending on the severity of the disease, the vast majority of patients who present to pharmacists and other primary health workers will respond in a satisfactory manner. Those who do not respond adequately by the time step 7 is reached should be referred for medical attention.

---

**Figure 7: Stepwise approach that may be used in the treatment of most forms of ocular allergy** (courtesy of Prof D Meyer)