

Often, I experience severe itching in my eyes. They become very irritable and I am forced to rub them, which, I have read, is harmful. Sometimes, the itching does not subside for two or three days. A friend once suggested a remedy: cleaning the eyelid with cotton dipped in coconut oil and then burning the cotton, which would crackle. She suggested I repeat the process till the cotton stopped crackling. Surprisingly, this worked for me. Is this ok? Is there any scientific basis behind this remedy? Should I continue with it?

Tee Tai, Bangalore



Question? of the week

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Your symptoms are classical of allergic conjunctivitis. Allergic conjunctivitis is the reaction of your eyes when they are exposed to dust or pollen. You may also have other features of allergy like recurrent cold and running nose, sore throat, wheezing etc. Allergies tend to run in families, though no inheritance pattern is known. Skin tests are available to find out what you are allergic to.

Symptoms include intense itching, watering, red eyes, puffiness of the lids, especially in the mornings and a rosy discharge. There is no known cure for this condition unless you totally avoid exposure to the allergen (substance causing the allergy), which is extremely difficult in most cases. Most people get a good relief from using eye drops containing anti-histaminics, which reduce the allergic manifestations. They are safe for long term use. A group of medicines called mast cell stabilisers are beneficial in preventing recurrences. If there is no relief from these medicines, your doctor may prescribe steroid drops, which are quite effective. However, these drops are associated with serious side effects on long term usage. Hence, should be avoided, except in some severe cases.

A few other measures are helpful in providing relief from symptoms. Keep windows in your home and car closed during the pollen season; use air conditioning instead. Avoid outdoor activities such as gardening, playing outdoor games, especially in the morning and early afternoon when pollen release is at its height.

Wash your hands, face and hair often to rid them of pollen that may accumulate. Don't rub your eyes. Rubbing stimulates the release of chemicals which can make your eyes even itchier. It may also change the curvature of your cornea and result in astigmatism (where you may have to wear glasses to see clearly). Use cold compresses to alleviate the itching.

The treatment advised by your friend has absolutely no scientific basis. On the other hand it could be harmful to your eyes; the soot particles may cause more reaction in your eyes. Please stop it immediately and consult your eye doctor. ■

- DR ARUN SAMPRATHI
Consultant eye surgeon

Sir,