

## **RED EYE: Red Flag or Red Herring?**

Red may be a beautiful color. Exciting perhaps. Certainly that is what bull fighters, and bulls, think. But never mind the bull. Red in medicine reminds us of blood, and inflammation. The signs of inflammation in the centuries-old Latin teachings, “rubor, calor, dolor, and tumor,” start with rubor, redness. So let us drop the Latin and the “learned” language and ask ourselves a simple question: What if my eye is red? What does it mean, and is it something I should worry about? I will try to give you a general feel for when to be concerned (not worried, and certainly not panicked, just concerned) about a red eye. The usual disclaimer applies. The purpose of this article is NOT to give medical advice to any individual or for any individual condition, but rather to give a general overview and to educate about eye conditions presenting as a red eye.

The most important way to approach a red eye is to ask about the circumstances and accompanying symptoms and signs. For example, if the red eye is triggered by trauma, it is crucial to seek immediate help. In general, the most important symptoms to be concerned about are loss of vision and pain. So if your eye is red *and* painful, and vision is very poor compared to its customary state, it is definitely time to urgently seek the advice of your ophthalmologist. If you have had eye surgery and the eye becomes red and painful, it is crucial to seek immediate help and advice from your surgeon.

If your eyes are simply itchy or a bit scratchy, in addition to being red, you may need to seek help, but you need not consult your doctor in the *minutes* following consulting your mirror.

Let us now discuss some of the most common red eye conditions.

Dry eye can cause enough irritation that a reaction follows that makes the eye red. Once diagnosed, a dry eye condition can be treated in a number of ways, and the dryness, discomfort, and redness can be significantly reduced or eliminated.

Allergic eye conditions are extremely common. They usually affect both eyes at once, though they can be a bit asymmetrical at times. These are also easily treatable once diagnosed, although diagnosis may require patience. Some allergic conditions are seasonal and some may be triggered by unsuspected allergens, contributed perhaps by your pet or by one of your medications, most commonly an eye drop.

“Pink eye” usually refers to an infection from a very common virus. Though this infection is quite annoying and sometimes looks scary, to a large extent it resolves on its own. Often there is a clear history of being around a grandchild or a friend with red, itchy eyes, and it is important to avoid contagion until the condition resolves. It is also important to be seen if this condition develops, because occasionally some scarring can occur following the infection.

Bleeding in the conjunctiva, the “saran wrap” of the eye, is one of the most common conditions, and one of the scariest to many. It is triggered by coughing or straining, and

people taking aspirin, ibuprofen, or similar medications are more prone to such events because these medications thin the blood. The amount of blood released is actually tiny, but because of the pressure of the “saran wrap,” it spreads widely and may cover a good portion of the surface of the globe. Usually this condition will disappear on its own. It is still important to get checked to make sure how thin your blood is, and if there is another hemorrhage in other parts of the eye or body.

A stye usually grows inside the eyelid. So it is not technically the eye that is involved, although it could get a bit red, too. Styes can be treated with warm compresses for a couple of weeks, and many will diminish or resolve. If they persist, they can be removed by your ophthalmologist. They should not be left for too long since, rarely, some lid cancers can be mistaken for styes.

Let me mention some conditions that are of more concern. Glaucoma, when the pressure INSIDE the eye becomes very elevated, can cause a red, painful eye. Uveitis is a condition that may be related to infection or inflammation INSIDE the eye. Scleritis, an inflammation of the sclera, the white part of the eye underneath the conjunctiva (the saran wrap), can also be a serious sign of more serious disease. Fortunately, all these serious conditions most often (but not always) are accompanied by pain and decreased vision, inviting people to seek immediate help.

Hopefully, some of this information is interesting, and you will always yield to the red flags of pain and decreased vision. And what about those other Latin words? Calor, dolor, tumor: Should we worry about them? We did. Calor is heat, as in the word “calories.” Dolor is pain, giving us “dolorous,” painful or sorrowful. And tumor is swelling, as in tumor! We may revisit these other signs of inflammation and learn more in a future installment of this column. See you then.