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How to Know If That Pimple on Your Eyelid Is Actually a Sty

Hint: It probably is. Here's how to get rid of it.



If you've ever had a mysterious bump pop up on your eyelid, you know that it's basically impossible to focus on anything else. And even though it seems like the world's most inconveniently placed pimple, that bump may actually be a sty.

People typically use the word “stye” to refer to what ophthalmologists know as either a chalazion or a hordeolum.

While these terms both sound like something you'd catch during a Pokémon Go session, they're not nearly as much fun. A chalazion is a firm ball on the eyelid that doesn't look inflamed and doesn't tend to be painful, Lora Glass, M.D., assistant professor of ophthalmology and director of Medical Student Education in ophthalmology at Columbia University Medical Center, tells SELF. While a hordeolum is also a hard sphere that appears on the eyelid, it's typically inflamed, irritated, and painful or tender. Sometimes these symptoms can signal that the bump has become infected, especially if they don't get better or actually get worse even after treatment.

It's worth noting that not everyone can agree on the terminology when it comes to styes, chalazia, and hordeola. “These terms are not used consistently in the medical literature or in the office, because patients often come in with something that blurs the lines,” Dr. Glass says. All this confusion surrounding eyelid bumps contributes to people using “stye” as a catch-all term. “Clinically, we try to stick to ‘chalazion’ or ‘hordeolum’ without using the word ‘stye,’ because they reflect something about the inflammatory level of the eyelid,” Dr. Glass says.

These eyelid bumps are similar to pimples, but with one major difference.

While pimples can happen *around* your eyes, if you're dealing with a bump directly on the eyelid (especially on your lash line anywhere) or right underneath it, acne probably isn't your issue. “A ‘stye’ is not really a pimple because pimples on the face form in different glands. These are specialized eyelid glands,” Dr. Glass says.

Chalazia and hordeola both occur when the Meibomian glands on your eyelid get clogged. “Meibomian glands make oil, which is really important because it helps your tear film not evaporate so quickly,” Dr. Glass says. There are various reasons these glands can get clogged. One is rosacea, especially the ocular kind that can lead to the condition dry eye and eyelid irritation, **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital, tells SELF. Eczema, a chronic skin condition that can cause red, inflamed breakouts, can also affect the eyelids and contribute to chalazia and hordeola, Dr. Glass adds. Some other potential eyelid-clogging culprits: excessively dusty air (if you're by a construction site, for example), hormonal fluctuations due to stress, and makeup.

Treating a stye isn't the same as treating acne.

While acne treatment might include everything from medication to topical agents, getting rid of a stye usually requires a gentler approach. With chalazia and hordeola, warm compresses are “a mainstay of treatment,” Dr. Glass says. She suggests getting gel eye masks you can microwave (to avoid burning your eyelid, they should feel warm to the touch but not too hot to hold in your hand). Make sure to put a clean towel over the mask or wipe it down before placing it over your eyelid bump. Dr. Glass recommends doing a warm compress four to five times a day for at least five to 10 minutes at a time.

“Once you start doing warm compresses, you should notice a difference within a couple of days,” Dr. Glass says. “As long as it's getting better, you're in a good spot.” If the bump on your eyelid seems to stop getting better, wait a week or two to make sure, then see a doctor, especially if it's impeding your vision at all. And if your eyelid bump is actively getting more inflamed, irritated, or painful, it may be infected. “If a lesion persists or gets worse, see your doctor,” Dr. Goldenberg says. A doctor might prescribe you anti-inflammatory antibiotics like the acne medication doxycycline, Dr. Glass says. They may also recommend eye wipes or eye drops to ward off dry eye and eye irritation.

It's a good idea to skip makeup as your eyelid bump heals, Dr. Glass says. And if you find yourself getting eyelid bumps often (or if you want to avoid getting one in the first place), Dr. Glass recommends looking for makeup products and removers that are labeled non-comedogenic, meaning they won't clog your pores.

By the way, if you have an eyelid bump that seems to *almost* disappear, then comes back with a vengeance, be sure to mention that to your doctor.

"If somebody has a 'stye' over and over in the exact same spot and not anywhere else, that could sometimes be a skin cancer," Dr. Glass says, adding that when this happens, it's most often the uncommon cancer sebaceous carcinoma. "This is very rare, but it does happen," she says. Sebaceous carcinoma is more likely to appear in people who are over middle age and may also be more likely in those of Asian descent, Dr. Glass says. It's also more likely to affect people who are immune-compromised.

No matter the cause of the lump on your eyelid, don't hesitate to loop in a medical professional. There's so much confusion out there about what eyelid bumps are, along with how to treat them. Instead of going it alone, seek out medical advice you can trust to help your eyelid bump heal as soon as possible.