

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

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If you've ever had a mysterious pimple 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 (also sometimes written as "sty").

What are the symptoms of a sty?

What people typically call a "sty" is 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.

A hordeolum is also a hard sphere that appears like a pimple on the eyelid, but 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.

However, 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.

So it makes sense that so many of us use "sty" as a catchall term. Still, "clinically, we try to stick to 'chalazion' or 'hordeolum' without using the word *stye*," Dr. Glass says, because those terms more accurately indicate whether or not your eye bump is inflamed.

What causes styes?

These eyelid bumps are similar to pimples, but with one major difference: While pimples can happen *around* your eyes, if you're dealing with what looks like a pimple 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. Pretty much anything that causes itchiness, irritation, or inflammation in the area can increase your likelihood of clogging those glands and then getting a stye on your eyelid.

A few of the most common causes of these bumps include:

Rosacea: One type of rosacea in particular, ocular rosacea, can cause 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. Ocular rosacea is also characterized by redness, swelling, and itching around the eye, which can make styes more likely.

Eczema: This chronic skin condition that can cause red, inflamed breakouts, can also affect the eyelids and contribute to chalazia and hordeola, Dr. Glass adds.

Dusty, allergen-filled air: Anything that causes your eyes to become itchy and irritated—whether that's because you have dust particles in your eye or because you have seasonal allergies—can lead to a stye. So, if you're near a construction site or spending a lot of time inside a dusty apartment, that makes eye irritation more likely.

Hormonal fluctuations: Hormones play a huge role in vision and eye health, as they do in many, many bodily functions. Specifically, hormones help regulate the meibomian glands' oil production. And if your hormones are fluctuating due to normal monthly changes, a change in birth control, for instance, or a significant increase in stress, that may increase your chances of developing a stye.

Makeup and skin care: Products you use on or around your eyes, including makeup and skin-care products, can contribute to both oiliness and irritation in the area. If you're prone to irritation in these sensitive areas, it's important to use only gentle products—and it's probably a good idea to chat with a dermatologist if you have sensitive eyes and notice you're getting styes frequently.

Here's the best way to treat a stye.

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.

Warm compresses: 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."

Go easy on makeup and skin care: It's a good idea to skip eye makeup and skin-care products in that area 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 noncomedogenic, meaning they won't clog your pores.

See your doctor for prescription treatments: 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.

If it comes back, see your doctor.

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.