

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

STYE (HORDEOLUM)**WHAT IS IT?**

A sty (or hordeolum) is a red, painful lump that can develop on the upper or lower eyelid. Lesions may be internal (just inside the edge of the eyelid) or external (on the outer surface at the base of the eyelashes). Most styes are harmless to the eye and do not affect vision.

WHAT CAUSES IT?

Styes occur when oil glands on the edge of the eyelid become inflamed or infected. External lesions may also be caused by infected eyelash follicles. Risk factors for developing a sty include not washing hands prior to touching the eyes, not removing eye make-up thoroughly (especially if left on overnight), or not replacing eye make-up regularly.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A sty typically presents as a red, painful lump on the edge of the eyelid that develops over a few days. It can resemble a pimple. Other symptoms include eyelid swelling/redness/pain, tearing, and a scratchy or irritated feeling in the eye (less common).

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?

Your medical provider will ask questions about your symptoms and examine your eye. No special testing is needed to make a diagnosis.

HOW IS IT TREATED?

Most styes get better on their own after a few days to a week.

- Warm compresses to the eyelid are key to draining the sty and decreasing pain.
 - Compresses should be applied for at least 10 minutes 4 times per day.
 - You can make your own compress by putting a warm washcloth in a Ziploc bag (to help it retain heat) or filling a plastic bag with warm mashed potatoes.
- There is little evidence that antibiotic eye ointment, oral antibiotics, or steroid eye drops promote healing. If these treatments are warranted, they may be prescribed under the supervision of an ophthalmologist.
- Discard used contact lenses and eye make-up (e.g., eye liner, mascara, false lashes, face sponge if contact with eye area). Wash your make-up brushes thoroughly! Do not wear new contact lenses or eye make-up until the sty has fully healed.
- Avoid squeezing or picking at the sty as this can lead to new or worsening infection.
- Wash your hands frequently, especially before and after contact with your eye.

CALL FOR A FOLLOW-UP APPOINTMENT IF...

- Your sty does not resolve after a week of warm compresses.
- Your sty gets bigger or starts to bleed.
- The redness or swelling spreads to a large portion of the eyelid or other parts of your face.
- The whites of your eye become red.
- Your vision is affected.

Reference: Ghosh, Chandak, M.D., MPH & Ghosh, Tanya, M.D. *Eyelid Lesions*. UpToDate, 16 July 2024, <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/eyelid-lesions?csi=1ef1aee4-5cda-445f-ab4f-0963a4200e57&source=contentShare>. Accessed 9 June 2025.