



# Herpes Simplex Virus Keratitis

## What is herpes simplex virus keratitis?

This is a viral infection of the cornea (the clear surface, or 'window' of the eye). It is usually caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV-1), the same virus that causes cold sores.

## What are the symptoms?

HSV keratitis generally affects one eye but on rare occasions both eyes.

Symptoms may include:

- A red eye
- Eye pain or foreign body sensation
- Sensitivity to light
- Blurred vision
- Small blisters around the eyelid

## Why have I got it?

HSV-1 is a very common virus, passed on by direct skin-to-skin contact. Most people are infected by the time they are 60 but only one in three will notice any symptoms. After the first infection, the virus remains in the nerves of the face and can re-emerge at any time. It can cause a cold sore, or an ulcer in the eye. The virus can be spread directly to the eye from a cold sore, so avoid touching your eyes if you have a cold sore present.

Symptoms can be worse if you have eczema or a reduced ability to fight infections, taking medications that affect immunity, for example.

## How is it diagnosed?

A clinician will examine the eye. A sample may be taken from the corneal surface to confirm the presence of HSV-1. This is performed with a cotton bud, after numbing the eye so will not be painful. A negative result does not mean you do not have HSV-1, as testing may not be positive in 100% of cases.

## What is the treatment?

- **Antiviral eye gel**– a course of eye gel (ganciclovir) is the treatment for most cases.
- **Antiviral tablets**– a 7-day course of antiviral tablets (e.g. aciclovir, valaciclovir) may be required in severe and/or recurrent cases.
- **Steroid eye drops**– sometimes these are used to reduce inflammation and minimise scarring.
- **Advice for contact lens wearers**  
Contact lenses should not be worn until all symptoms have gone.

