Subconjunctival Hemorrhage

What is a subconjunctival hemorrhage?

A subconjunctival hemorrhage is similar to an ordinary bruise on the skin—it's like a bruise of the eye. It usually appears as a single, concentrated spot of red, or many scattered red splotches, on the white of the eye. The redness is blood under the conjunctiva, a clear membrane that covers the white of the eye (called the sclera) and the inner eyelids.

As alarming as a subconjunctival hemorrhage looks, it is actually a common minor occurrence. It is almost always harmless and will heal on its own within about a week or two. It does not affect your vision and generally you won't feel any pain. In fact, you may not even be aware that you have a subconjunctival hemorrhage until someone points it out or you look in the mirror.

What causes a subconjunctival hemorrhage?

The conjunctiva contains many blood vessels and capillaries, the tiniest blood vessels in the body. A subconjunctival hemorrhage develops when blood vessels in the conjunctiva break, causing blood to pool between the conjunctiva and sclera (white part of the eye). This minor bleeding under the eye's outer membrane is what causes the bright red spot to appear on the white of the eye.

The most common causes of these broken blood vessels are vigorous coughing, sneezing, straining, or any similar action that temporarily raises blood pressure in the veins, leading to a small rupture in a blood vessel or capillary. Occasionally, subconjunctival hemorrhage can also occur because of trauma to the eye—even minor trauma such as rubbing the eye vigorously.

Other common but less frequent causes of subconjunctival hemorrhage include diabetes mellitus, high blood pressure, and excessive amounts of certain medications such as aspirin or blood thinners like Warfarin (Coumadin), which affect the body's bleeding mechanisms. Much less frequent to rare causes may include blood clotting disorders or other systemic blood disorders.

Subconjunctival hemorrhage can also be a result of a severe eye infection or eye or eyelid surgery.

What are the symptoms of subconjunctival hemorrhage?

There are no painful symptoms associated directly with a subconjunctival hemorrhage, though the eye may feel a little scratchy or very mildly irritated.

It most often looks like a single large or small spot of red blood, or many scattered red splotches, on the white of the eye.

Who is at risk for subconjunctival hemorrhage?

Anyone can develop a subconjunctival hemorrhage; however, people who have the following conditions that raise blood pressure in the veins have a greater risk of developing subconjunctival hemorrhage:

- Severe cough or sneeze that causes strain and temporarily raises the blood pressure in their veins;
- Diabetes;
- High blood pressure;
- Conditions that require them to be on blood thinning medications;
- Clotting or systemic blood disorders.

Newborn infants often have subconjunctival hemorrhage. It is believed this is caused by the pressure changes the infant's body experiences during childbirth.

How is subconjunctival hemorrhage diagnosed?

The best way for your doctor or ophthalmologist to diagnose subconjunctival hemorrhage is by looking at your eye. You probably won't need other tests, though your doctor may ask you some questions about your overall health history. You may also have your blood pressure taken, and your doctor may have a routine blood test done to make sure you don't have a potentially serious bleeding disorder.

How is subconjunctival hemorrhage treated?

Treatment is generally not necessary. Over time, the blood spot will slowly disappear, clearing up on its own. This may take days or weeks, depending on the size of the blood spot. If your eye is irritated, your ophthalmologist may recommend that you use over-the-counter artificial tears.

In general, expect your ophthalmologist to reassure you that the blood spot will go away. Although subconjunctival hemorrhage can be a startling sight, it is usually a temporary, harmless condition that your ophthalmologist can assess appropriately for you.