

Ocular Herpes

Herpes of the eye, or ocular herpes, is a recurrent viral infection that is caused by the herpes simplex virus and is the most common infectious cause of corneal blindness in the U.S. Previous studies show that once people develop ocular herpes, they have up to a 50 percent chance of having a recurrence. This second flare-up could come weeks or even years after the initial occurrence.

Symptoms

Ocular herpes can produce a painful sore on the eyelid or surface of the eye and cause inflammation of the cornea. Prompt treatment with anti-viral drugs helps to stop the herpes virus from multiplying and destroying epithelial cells. However, the infection may spread deeper into the cornea and develop into a more severe infection called stromal keratitis, which causes the body's immune system to attack and destroy stromal cells. Stromal keratitis is more difficult to treat than less severe ocular herpes infections. Recurrent episodes of stromal keratitis can cause scarring of the cornea, which can lead to loss of vision and blindness.

Treatment

Like other herpetic infections, herpes of the eye can be controlled. An estimated 400,000 Americans have had some form of ocular herpes. Each year, nearly 50,000 new and recurring cases are diagnosed in the United States, with the more serious stromal keratitis accounting for about 25 percent. In one large study, researchers found that recurrence rate of ocular herpes was 10 percent within one year, 23 percent within two years, and 63 percent within 20 years. Some factors believed to be associated with recurrence include fever, stress, sunlight, and eye injury.