

ECTROPION

Ectropion (ek-trow-pee-on) is an abnormal lid condition that results in the outward turning of an eyelid, away from its natural position against the eyeball. It may occur in one or both lower lids, and sometimes may even involve the upper lids. The condition is usually only annoying, but occasionally it can pose a danger to the eye.

What makes ectropion dangerous?

Normal eyelids protect and lubricate the eyeball. When you sleep, they cover the eyeball and prevent drying and ulcerations. When you are awake, each sweep of the upper eyelid moving over the eyeball acts as a "windshield wiper," moistening and cleansing the delicate tissues, while the lower lid helps cover and moisten the lower part of the eye. When you have an ectropion, the moistening effect is lost, drying occurs, and the eye can ulcerate and become infected.

Symptoms

Ectropion of the lower lid: The normal lid maintains a thin layer of tears over the eyeball and aids their natural flow toward the tear drainage channels near the nose; if the lid falls (or is pulled) away from its normal position, the eye feels "full of tears" and waters all the time. If excessive, the tears run down the cheek. As the condition progresses and the lid pulls farther away from the eye, there may be a continuous sensation of dryness or burning in the eye or a feeling of a foreign body. If the eyeball dries too much or begins to ulcerate, it will become bloodshot, irritated, and painful.

Ectropion of the upper lid: Loss of the "windshield wiper" function causes continual dryness and blurry vision. The eye compensates by generating more moisture, which can cause further blur, and also adds to the feeling that the eye is watering all the time. However, most of the watering stems from the abnormal lid position, which prevents normal tear drainage into the nose.

What causes ectropion?

The eyelids are held against the eyeballs by the natural tension of the

eyelid muscles and the tendons that support them. With again, these muscles do not function as well, and the lids fall away from the eyeball, especially when you lean forward. Ectropion may also result from scars after lacerations or surgery near the eyes, from burns, from disease (such as facial paralysis), or from some degenerative skin conditions that cause the lids to be pulled away from the eyes.

Treatment

Treatment varies according to the cause, your age and occupation, the severity of the condition and the symptoms, whether it is the progressing, and whether you have had previous treatment and/or surgery.

If your ectropion is slight, various eye drops and decongestants may offer relief. If the lid is actually pouting outward, dryness of its inner surface may be relieved with lubricant ointments. Depending on your symptoms, you may choose to live with the problem of mild ectropion. That choice is satisfactory if the appearance doesn't bother you, drying is not excessive, and there is no ulceration or infection of the eyeball.

For a severe case in which there are severe symptoms and discomfort, or if there is ulceration of the eyeball, plastic surgery of the lids is necessary. In most cases, surgery involves removing the excess tissue and tightening the remaining tissue. Although surgery is usually curative, some patients achieve only partial improvement.

Sometimes the ectropion recurs as the tissues continue to age and lose elasticity, and surgery may again be needed to solve the problem.