About Eye Cancer

A Quick Guide

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This is a brief summary of our information on ‘About eye cancer’. You will find more detailed information on the website. There are sections on

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You can view this information in a larger print on our website.

About the eye
There are 2 main areas of the eye. The front of the eye is the area you can see. The back of the eye is the area behind. It is often called the eyeball.

The eyeball
The outside of the eyeball is a fibrous white layer called the sclera. Inside this is a layer rich in blood. This is called the uvea, and is the site of many eye cancers. The third, innermost layer of the eyeball contains the retina. The retina is the nerve layer of the eye. The cells of the retina react to light. They send messages to the brain through the optic nerve, making it possible for you to see.

The inside of the eyeball is filled with a clear, jelly like substance called vitreous humour.

The front of the eye
The coloured part of your eye is called the iris. In the middle of the iris is the pupil, which is the hole that lets light into your eye. Both are covered by a clear layer called the cornea.

Around the eye
The tissue surrounding the eye is called the orbit. It is made up of muscles and nerves. The tear glands and the eyelid are called adnexal structures. Cancers that develop in them are called adnexal cancers.
Risks and causes of eye cancer
Eye cancer is very rare in the UK. We don’t know exactly what causes it. But we do know about some of the things that increase people’s risk of getting the different types of eye cancer.

Melanoma of the eye is more common in people with light eyes, people with a lot of moles, and possibly in people who have had too much exposure to sunlight.

Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC) of the eye is more common in people with a weakened immune system, including those with HIV. Sunlight exposure increases the risk of SCC in people with a weakened immune system. Infection with the human papilloma virus (HPV) is a likely cause. But HPV infection is very common and most people infected don’t get eye cancer so other factors are probably involved.

Lymphoma of the eye is also more common in people with a weakened immune system.

Kaposi’s sarcoma of the eye is more common in people with HIV or AIDS. But it is a very rare tumour.

Retinoblastoma is a rare type of eye cancer. It most commonly affects children under the age of 5. About 4 out of 10 retinoblastomas (40%) are due to an inherited faulty gene. This means they run in families.

Symptoms of eye cancer
People with eye cancer may have:

- Bulging of one eye
- Complete or partial loss of sight
- Pain in or around the eye (rare with eye cancer)
- Blurred vision
- Change in the appearance of the eye

Eye cancer can also cause:

- Seeing spots, flashes of light or wiggly lines in front of your eyes
- Blinkered vision (loss of peripheral vision) – you can see what is straight ahead, but not what is to the sides
- A dark spot on the coloured part of the eye (the iris) that is getting bigger
- Eye irritation, red eye or chronic inflammation of the conjunctiva (conjunctivitis)

Pain is quite rare unless the cancer has spread to the outside of the eye.

Remember that cancer of the eye is rare. And eye conditions that aren’t eye cancer can cause many of these symptoms. But it is important that you report any of them to your GP. The earlier a cancer is picked up, the easier it is to treat and the more likely the treatment is to be successful.
Screening for eye cancer
Screening means testing people for early signs of cancer before they have any symptoms.

There is no national screening programme in the UK for eye cancer. These cancers are not common. And there are no specific tests available to screen for eye cancers.

You can do a couple of things to make sure early signs of eye cancer are spotted. Regular optician appointments are the best way of checking for eye cancer. Opticians sometimes find eye melanomas when they are doing routine eye examinations.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) referral guidelines for GPs recommend that children should be checked soon after birth if they have a parent or brother or sister with retinoblastoma.

You may notice symptoms of eye cancer yourself. This is a very rare cancer, but if you notice any changes in the way your eye looks or feels, see your GP.

Types of eye cancer
Eye cancers are also called ocular cancers. Ocular is the medical term for the eye.

Melanoma of the eye
Melanoma starting in the eyeball is the most common type of eye cancer in adults. Your specialist may call it uveal or choroidal melanoma. Doctors also group melanomas of the eyeball according to the way the cancerous cells look under a microscope. There are 3 types – spindle cell melanomas, non spindle cell melanomas, and a mix of both cell types.

Lymphoma of the eye
Lymphomas usually begin in the lymph nodes. Very rarely, lymphoma begins inside the eyes. This is called primary intraocular lymphoma. Intraocular lymphomas are always a type of non Hodgkin lymphoma.

Squamous cell cancer of the conjunctiva
The conjunctiva is the clear moist membrane that covers the front of the eye and lines the inside of the eyelid. Although rare, squamous cell cancer is the most common cancer of the conjunctiva.

Eye cancers in children
Retinoblastoma nearly always occurs in children under the age of 5. Medulloepithelioma is a very rare type of eye tumour usually found in young children.

Cancers around the eyeball
Cancers can develop in the tissues around the eye. They are cancers of muscle, nerve and skin tissue.

Secondary eye cancers
Sometimes a cancer can spread to the eye from another part of the body. A cancer that has spread to the eye is called a secondary eye cancer.
Should I see an eye cancer specialist?
It can be very difficult for GPs to decide who may have a suspected cancer and who may have something much more minor. With many symptoms, it is perfectly right that your GP should ask you to wait to see if they get better or respond to treatment, such as antibiotics.

The NICE guidelines
The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has produced guidelines for GPs to help them decide who needs to see a specialist urgently. There are no specific guidelines for eye cancers apart from retinoblastoma. The guidelines for retinoblastoma mostly affect children aged under the age of 2.

Guidelines for urgent referral
You should get an appointment within 2 weeks for an urgent referral. The symptoms that need urgent referral to a specialist for possible retinoblastoma are

- If the pupil of the eye looks white instead of black – sometimes this is noticed on photos when a flash is used.

If you have had other symptoms such as a new squint, changes in how well you can see, or problems with eyesight in a child with a family history of retinoblastoma, your GP may refer you for further tests.

If you are still worried
If you are concerned that your GP is not taking any symptoms as seriously as you think he or she should, you could take this information along to an appointment. Ask your GP to talk it through with you.

What to ask your doctor about eye cancer

- Am I more likely to get eye cancer than other people?
- How will I know if I have eye cancer?
- Are there different types of eye cancer?
- Can I be screened for eye cancers?
- Do eye cancers run in the family?
- Is there anything I can do to reduce my risk of having eye cancers?

For more information, visit our website http://www.cruk.org/about-cancer

You will find a wide range of detailed, up to date information for people affected by cancer, including a clinical trials database that you can search for trials in the UK. Our information is based on the best current scientific evidence and reviewed regularly by leading clinicians and experts in health and social care.

For answers to your questions about cancer call our Cancer Information Nurses on 0808 800 4040 9am till 5pm Monday to Friday.