

## Blocked Tear Ducts of Babies

In some newborn babies one or both eyes may become watery. Sometimes the baby's eye can then look sticky, particularly after a sleep. This is very common and normally goes without any treatment.

### What causes the blocked tear duct?

The cause is a delay in the opening of the tear duct. This duct is the tiny tube that leads from the inner corner of the eye to inside the nose. Normal eyes constantly make tears to keep the eye moist. Tears normally drain down the tear duct into the nose. Eyes can become watery either because you make too many tears (for example crying), or because the tear duct is blocked.

### How does it get better?

In about 1 in 5 newborn babies the tear duct is not quite fully developed. It can affect one or both eyes. In time, the tear duct finishes developing and the problem goes. This usually happens within a few weeks after birth. In some babies it can take several months. If it is still blocked by 12 months of age, your baby may be referred to an eye specialist to 'probe' the tear duct.

### Is it serious?

No. A typical case is as follows. Tear production in newborn babies may take a week to start, so you may not notice watery eyes at first. You may then notice one or both eyes becoming watery. The baby is usually not bothered. Sometimes after a sleep the affected eye looks sticky. You may have to wipe away some 'glue-like' material. The eyeball looks healthy and white. After the problem seems to have gone, if the child has a cold the watery eyes may return for the duration of the cold. This is because the newly opened tear duct may become blocked by mucus.

### What should be done?

Don't worry, it normally goes away. If gluey material develops then wipe it away with some cotton wool soaked in sterile water (cool water that has previously been boiled). It may help if you massage the tear duct four or five times a day. To do this use gentle pressure on the outside of the nose. This may help to clear pooled tears in the upper part of the blocked duct. It may also

help the tear duct to develop.

### **Possible problems**

Slight redness of the eyeball may come and go. This is due to mild inflammation, and no treatment is needed. Sometimes this may develop into a conjunctivitis (infection of the outer part of the eye). The eye may then look inflamed and red. This is not usually serious. Antibiotic eye drops are sometimes prescribed to help clear conjunctivitis.

Rarely, a watering eye in a baby is due to other eye problems. With a blocked tear duct, the eyeball is usually white and the baby is well and not bothered by the watering eye. The following symptoms may indicate a different problem. If they occur, see a doctor

- If the eye becomes inflamed, angry or red.
- If the baby rubs the eye a lot or seems in pain.
- If the baby does not like to open their eye, or light seems to hurt the baby's eye.