

# **Blepharospasm**

## **What is Blepharospasm?**

Blepharospasm is a type of focal dystonia in which there is involuntary contraction of the muscles of the eyelids causing closure of the lids. This does not have any effect on a person's vision or mental faculties. The only time vision would be affected is if the contractions become so extreme that they force the eyelids closed. If a sustained blink occurs, a patient may experience a functional blindness. Symptoms include frequent blinking and irritation of the eye. Dry eyes, and/or photophobia have also been noted to be present with blepharospasm. Other involuntary movements can occur in addition to blepharospasm such as forceful opening of the jaw, retraction of the lips, or protrusion of the tongue. Though the cause is unknown, patients should be evaluated for diseases that may also have blepharospasm as a symptom. It is possible that there is an abnormal function of the basal ganglia of the brain. It is also possible that the increased blink excitability may be from chronic trigeminal nerve stimulation and therefore no evidence of any neurological disease.

## **Who Gets Blepharospasm?**

The cause of blepharospasm is believed to be unknown although genetic factors are likely. Frequently, it occurs in women over 50 years of age. Patients with blepharospasm often have a family history of other movement disorder (e.g. essential tremors, tics, Tourette's etc.) It is possible for it to be inherited, but this has proven to be rare. Blepharospasm is not fatal but is usually a life-long condition.

## **How is Blepharospasm Diagnosed?**

Blepharospasm is diagnosed by the clinical evaluation by a physician, usually a neurologist or ophthalmologist. It may occasionally be difficult to diagnose. Usually it is necessary for the doctor to evaluate the information provided from the patient, and the physical and neurological examinations to provide the diagnosis.

## **How is Blepharospasm Treated?**

Treatment includes areas of focus: oral medications, botulinum toxin injections, and surgery. Each of these can be used separately, or in combination with the others to provide the best treatment. In our clinical experience we have found that utilizing a specific orthotic that varies in height has helped some of our patients with their blinking disorder which either slowed it down or discontinued the movement. (See videos)

Stress makes all movement disorders, including blepharospasm, worse. Dark glasses are used for those who experience photophobia associated with blepharospasm. They reduce

the intensity of sunlight which bothers many people with blepharospasm, and they hide the eyes. This fear of sustained spasms occurring while driving, crossing the road, socializing, walking, or taking part in some sporting activity, etc. becomes overwhelming, and the patient stays at home in familiar, safe surroundings.