Dear Alice,

The "whites" of my eyes are always red. I get enough sleep. I eat healthy. I exercise daily. But my eyes are never white. I really dislike the appearance. My friends all have white "whites" of their eyes. I've tried using visine and other products, but they don't work.

Any suggestions? Ideas?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Props for living such a healthy lifestyle. Unfortunately, as you seem to have realized, that may not help your bloodshot eyes. How long have you been experiencing the redness? If it's been more than two weeks, a visit to your health care provider may be in order. Unless the redness you're experiencing is accompanied by eye pain, discharge, or impaired vision, it is unlikely that you have a more serious eye disease or infection. In reality, there are two likely culprits that may be causing you to see red: allergies or eye irritation, both of which cause the blood vessels in the whites of the eyes to become enlarged. Let's break down why this might be happening.

Our eyes are super sensitive organs and it doesn't take much to irritate them. The redness you are experiencing could simply be a reaction to dry air (from air conditioning, for instance), sun exposure, or eye strain. Remedies for this could include wearing sunglasses when you're outside, using ample lighting while working indoors, and using eye drops that are meant to alleviate irritation. Not all eye drops are the same and if you are using one formulated to address symptoms of allergies instead of irritation (or vice versa), that could be the reason they don't seem to be working.

Another possibility, though, is that you do in fact have allergies, many of which may cause eye redness. When particles of these allergens (common ones include dust mites, pollen, and certain foods like peanuts) enter your body, your immune system recognizes them as foreign objects and activates antibodies to fight them off. This triggers the release of histamines, chemicals that control inflammatory response leading to typical symptoms such as sneezing, wheezing, hives, and red eyes. Common quick fixes to reduce exposure to environmental allergens include:

- Avoiding the use of down or wool bed covers that trap allergens
• Washing bed linens weekly
• Reducing indoor humidity with a dehumidifier or air conditioner
• Keeping your home free of dust and clutter

List adapted from The Mayo Clinic [2].

To pinpoint what is causing the redness and to find a solution, it's best to make an appointment with a health care provider. If you do decide to see your health care provider, s/he might perform a skin prick test to check for allergies. This involves injecting a tiny amount of a variety of allergens on your forearm or upper back. After fifteen minutes, s/he checks to see if there is any skin reaction. If there is, it will usually dissipate after a half hour. For some allergens, blood tests may also be used to test a person’s sensitivity. If you are diagnosed with an allergy, your health care provider might recommend over-the-counter oral antihistamines, prescription eye drops, or nasal sprays.

With this information in hand, hopefully your reds will turn white.

Alice!
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