

## **Sawaliram Question: Why do our eyes twitch?**

### **Answer:-**

I once heard a hilarious story from a colleague who had studied in one of our IIT-s. So they had a senior professor there whose one particular eye used to twitch from time to time. One day in his class a girl got up to ask a question. Perhaps it required a complicated answer, which would have needed some time to be explained properly. Hence the professor told her, “Please visit me in my office later for getting the entire answer, OK?” And his eye twitched right then and there! At first the girl was very surprised to notice this, but right next moment she became furious assuming it was an offensive gesture with a vulgar hidden meaning. She was about to approach the higher authorities with a complaint against the hapless professor, but thankfully others who knew about his long-term condition stopped the girl in time and made her understand what was actually going on. Perhaps this saved the professor’s job!

The colleague did not tell me if the professor got wiser thanks to this incident and later had his eye duly checked by a doctor. Because at times, this apparently harmless and peculiar medical condition does signal towards far more serious issues for our health.

But before we move on to those discussions, let me ask one thing first: haven’t you heard about those interesting and widespread beliefs from relatives and friends about the twitching of our eyes?

How about the one which says that if you are a woman then it is a bad omen to have your right eye twitching, and especially if you are married and/or has children, then your husband and/or kids will be harmed? No? Alright, how about the one where it is a terrible sign to have a man’s right eye twitching? Still no? OK, tell me, have you ever seen a lady with a twitching right eye finding a piece of grass or straw – what we call as **तिन्का** – or a small piece of paper, then wetting it by touching it to her tongue, and finally placing it on her eye in the hope of ending the trouble?

Even if you haven’t personally heard of or seen any of the things written above, do think about the probable cause for which a married woman is made responsible for announcing a warning to her husband and/or children, but a married man is not similarly given any such responsibility for his wife and/or children.

I think it is time to look at what medical science has been able to learn so far about this occurrence.

Eye twitching is a repetitive, uncontrollable blinking or spasm of the eyelid, usually the upper one. But it can affect the lower lid as well. Only one eye is affected at a time. The twitching can range from barely noticeable to bothersome. It generally goes away within a short time but may recur over a few hours, days or longer, and may come and go at random. While the twitching is not painful, it can be annoying.

Doctors use the terms eye twitching, blepharospasm and eyelid spasm to refer to any of three separate conditions. They each have different causes.

We have already mentioned the simple eye twitching (doctors call it as myokymia). Now blepharospasm starts out as increased blinking of both eyes and may progress to the eyelids being squeezed shut. This type is relatively uncommon and not a serious condition, but can interfere with your daily life in more severe cases, where the spasms can become so intense that the eyelids stay shut for up to several hours.

The third one, eyelid spasm, is quite rare and involves more than just the eyelid muscles, as it frequently influences the muscles around the mouth too. Unlike other types of eyelid twitching, it usually affects only one side of the face.

Most people develop a minor eyelid twitch at some point in their lives. Although its cause cannot be determined on some occasions, it may be associated with:

- Alcohol intake
- Bright light
- Caffeine excess
- Fatigue
- Irritation of the eye surface or inner eyelids
- Physical exertion
- Smoking
- Stress
- Wind

Blepharospasm is a movement disorder (doctors call it as dystonia) of the muscles around the eye. No one knows exactly what causes it. Its onset can come without any warning. Sometimes the twitching eases or disappears altogether when a person is sleeping or concentrating on a task. But other eye conditions may come before blepharospasm or happen at the same time. These include inflammation of the eyelids (blepharitis), dry eye (decreased production of tears), light sensitivity and pink eye (conjunctivitis). It is twice as common in women as in men.

Eyelid spasm is typically caused by an artery pressing on the nerve to the facial muscles.

Now let us explore that hint given in the beginning about serious issues causing eye twitches at times.

You see, very rarely, eye twitching may be a sign of certain brain and nervous system disorders. When it is, it's almost always accompanied by other symptoms.

For example: it may be an early symptom of a chronic movement disorder – which has been referred to earlier by the term dystonia – especially if other facial spasms develop in addition to the eye twitching. So if you develop twitching or spasms elsewhere on your face, you should seek immediate medical attention. Another point to remember is that in exceptional cases eye twitching may be a sign of a brain or nerve disorders, such as Bell's palsy or Parkinson's disease, and others signs of those ailments will show up along with the twitching.

There is one other possibility where eye twitching may be a side effect of drugs, particularly medication used to treat epilepsy and psychosis.

Hence you should see your ophthalmologist if any of the following occurs:

- The twitching lasts longer than a week;
- Your eyelid closes after each twitch, which is not under your control;
- Your eye is red, swollen or has discharge, or your eyelids are drooping.

In the end it will be important for today's technology-friendly generation to note that eye strain from overuse of computers, tablets and smart-phones can also become a cause of twitching. So ophthalmologists advice people to follow the "20-20-20 rule" when using digital devices: every 20 minutes, look away from your screen and allow your eyes to focus on a distant object (at least 20 feet away) for 20 seconds or longer. This reduces eye muscle fatigue that may trigger the condition.

Now if only Sawaliraam had been present in that classroom on that fateful day to come to our professor's rescue.....

**By - Rudrashis**