

# Benefits Spotlight

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## Is Your “Benign” Eye Problem a Big Deal?

At one time or another, we all experience seemingly benign (though annoying) eye ailments. Eye floaters, red eyes, twitching and styes are common problems, but could they be indicative of a more serious problem?

Here’s a closer look at when four common eye complaints warrant a doctor’s attention.

**Eye Floaters:** Eye floaters—the speckled or cobweb-like strings that float in your eye—are mostly harmless. But, certain types of floaters may be signs of a problem. For instance, dense floaters that interfere with your vision, those that appear suddenly and those accompanied by flashes warrant an eye doctor visit. Flashes of light or loss of vision due to floaters could signal retinal detachment, which is an urgent medical condition. Problematic floaters may also be caused by infection, eye swelling and (rarely) tumors.

**Red Eyes:** Red or bloodshot eyes have a myriad of mild causes: eye dryness, broken blood vessels and contact lens irritation. Red, itchy, swollen eyes with discharge are the textbook signs of conjunctivitis (or pink eye)—your doctor can prescribe medication to treat it. Eye redness becomes more of a concern when it’s accompanied by eye pain, headache or vision problems or changes, so call your doctor if you have those symptoms. Eye redness can be a sign of corneal ulcers (this affects the layer on the front of your eye and is typically caused by an infection), acute glaucoma (a rapid build-up of pressure in your eye) and iritis (inflammation of your iris, the colored part of your eye).

**Twitching:** This common eye ailment is usually caused by stress, fatigue or eye strain. Sometimes, new contact lenses or eyeglasses can trigger eye twitching (you should talk to your eye doctor if that occurs). Twitching isn’t often cause for concern, but it can be a sign of several neurological conditions, including Tourette’s syndrome, Parkinson’s disease and Bell’s palsy. Talk to your eye doctor if eye twitching affects your vision, lasts more than a week, worsens or has accompanying redness, discharge or swelling.

**Styes:** A sty is a red, boil-like bump that forms along the edge of your eyelid. Though they’re often painful, a sty is generally a harmless eye problem. However, you should call your doctor if your sty doesn’t improve in 2 days, redness and inflammation moves from your eye to other parts of your face, or your vision decreases. Also, you should talk to your eye doctor if you get recurring styes—he or she can find out why that happens and teach you ways to prevent them.

Eye irritants come and go, but it's important to stay in touch with your eye doctor if you have any changes in vision or persisting eye pain. A quick check-up will give you the reassurance that your good eye health is intact.

## Sources

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## How to Conquer Your Dental Anxiety

If you're one of the millions of Americans who feels anxiety and fear at the thought of visiting a dentist, the upcoming new year is a great time to conquer your fear. The tips and techniques below will ensure your dental phobia doesn't keep you from good oral health.

**Guided Imagery:** Try visualizing a calming environment during your appointment—and get as detailed as possible. For example, close your eyes and picture yourself on a mountain: Feel the warmth of the sun, hear birds and water flowing in a nearby stream, smell the clean mountain air. Practice this a few times before your appointment to help strengthen your ability to ward off distraction. Some dentist offices even have virtual reality headsets that take the imagination factor out of it—the devices will show images of locale that will distract and calm you during your appointment.

**Relaxation Exercises:** Relaxation exercises include breath focus and meditation, and they can help manage anxiety at the dentist. Start by finding a comfortable position in the dentist chair, close your eyes and clear your mind. When using breath focus, breathe in slowly and deeply for three seconds then breathe out. Pause for three seconds and repeat. Meditation has a similar approach, with the addition of focusing on a specific word or mantra (like “calm”) to focus your attention and ease your mind.

**Dental Office Relaxation Amenities:** A growing number of dental offices are investing in devices and amenities to help ease patient anxiety. From sophisticated measures like virtual reality headsets to spa treatments (like heated neck wraps and paraffin hand wax), noise-canceling headphones, music and televisions in the exam room, ask your dental hygienist if the office provides any items to help settle your nerves during your appointment.

**Alternative Therapies:** Acupuncture and hypnosis have helped patients with severe dental anxiety, but talk to your dentist about whether these treatments are the right options for your specific case.

Finally, always discuss your dental anxiety with your dentist. He or she may adjust your care based on this knowledge, and your dentist may have additional tools not listed here to help keep your fears at bay and make visiting your dentist a more enjoyable experience.

