

## Stage lights make little girl tear up

**Q I have an eight-year-old niece who complains that the lights on stage make her eyes tear up and feel painful whenever we take her to watch live performances. What is the cause of this problem?**

**A** It appears that your niece is having symptoms of photophobia, commonly known as light sensitivity.

Although not uncommon in its mild form, this should be taken seriously as it can, on rare occasions, be a symptom of serious disorders.

It is difficult to comment on her case without a detailed medical history and examination, but assuming that the symptoms occur only during performances, serious and rarer causes of light sensitivity such as retinal dystrophies, glaucoma or aniridia (congenital absence of iris) are less likely.

In your niece's case, a problem with the ocular surface, such as the cornea (clear part of the eye) or the conjunctiva (white lining of the eye), needs to be ruled out.

During live performances, apart from the bright lights on stage, there is usually air-conditioning in the theatres and this can play a significant part too.

Air-conditioning causes excessive evaporation of tears, and the resultant dry eye will worsen any pre-existing ocular surface disorders.

In children, the most likely problems are

meibomian gland dysfunction and allergic eye diseases. For the latter, itching is usually a prominent symptom. It may show up every now and then.

Your niece may also have allergic conditions affecting other parts of the body, such as asthma, allergic rhinitis or eczema.

Once diagnosed, treatment with eyedrops can help her achieve good control and lasting relief from the symptoms.

Meibomian gland dysfunction, on the other hand, is a common but less well-known condition.

Meibomian glands are oil glands within the eyelid near the lashes which secrete oil into our tears. The oil is the "staying power" of the tears that helps prevent rapid tear evaporation.

In a person with meibomian gland dysfunction, vision is affected because there is too much or too little oil in the tear film.

In the early stages, patients are often asymptomatic, but if left unmanaged, the oil glands become blocked with thickened secretions.

The patient may then have dry eyes, itching, light sensitivity, red eyes or recurrent chalazia (cysts or lumps on the eyelids due to blockage of the oil glands).

Treatment involves a combination of warm compresses, lid hygiene, lubricants and antibiotics. In some cases, chalazia may need to be drained surgically.

Studies have also shown that taking

supplements with omega-3 fatty acids may be beneficial.

There are, of course, many other causes for light sensitivity. Even astigmatism (a form of refractive error in the eyes due to the irregular shape of the cornea), if uncorrected, can cause glare in bright light.

Another possibility is epiblepharon, which is relatively common in Asian children.

It is a condition where congenital inturned eyelashes can cause local irritation and erosions in the cornea, leading to light sensitivity.

I strongly advise you to take your niece to a paediatric ophthalmologist for a thorough check to evaluate the cause and administer treatment if necessary.



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