

Mr Anthony G Tyers

FRCS FRCSEd FRCOphth

New Hall Hospital Bodenham Salisbury Wiltshire SP5 4EY

Secretary tel: 01722 439680/422333 fax: 01722 410143

THYROID EYE DISEASE

Q *What is thyroid eye disease?*

A It is a condition of the eyes which is usually but not always associated with over action of the thyroid gland in the neck, also called 'thyrotoxicosis'. Thyroid eye disease is also known as "dysthyroid eye disease" or "Graves' orbitopathy". Thyrotoxicosis is also known as Graves' disease.

Q *What are the main effects of thyroid eye disease?*

A The eyes are usually pushed forward a little and the eyelids are held open more widely. The eyes may look red and feel uncomfortable. The movement of the eyes may be restricted causing double vision.

Q *How is thyroid eye disease treated?*

A If the thyroid gland is overactive tablets are prescribed to bring the activity in the gland back to normal. Eye drops are often prescribed for the eyes to make sure that they are comfortable. Further treatments may then be considered if necessary.

In the early weeks after the diagnosis has been made, the eyes and eyelids look and feel rather inflamed but gradually as the weeks pass this improves. After about six months from the diagnosis it is possible to start considering surgical treatments if necessary.

Q *Why might surgery be helpful in thyroid eye disease?*

A Thyroid eye disease often improves a little once the activity in the thyroid gland is back to normal. However the eyes often remain pushed forward to some extent and the eyelids are frequently more widely open than usual giving a "staring" appearance. There may also be double vision. Surgery for these eyelid changes is normally delayed until the thyroid gland has been normal again for at least six months.

Rarely it may be necessary to operate soon after the diagnosis of thyroid eye disease has been made. This earlier surgery is considered only if the vision is under threat, not for cosmetic reasons. The surgery may be directed at the widely open eyelids or at the pressure behind the eyes. The second type of surgery is called "decompression" and it aims to reduce the pressure behind the eyes to preserve vision.

Q *If the eyes are pushed forward what can be done to correct this?*

A “Decompression” surgery aims to reduce the pressure behind the eye so that it can move back towards its normal position. As mentioned above this type of surgery is sometimes necessary in the early stages after diagnosis if the pressure builds up and threatens vision. Most surgeons reserve decompression surgery for this situation, where the vision is at risk. Occasionally however surgeons will agree to do decompression surgery in an attempt to improve the cosmetic appearance of the eyes. This can achieve a degree of improvement although it is often disappointing. In addition the surgery can be complicated by long-term double vision. It is normally better to improve the appearance of the eyes by correcting the position of the eyelids rather than having decompression surgery.

Q *What can be done to improve the appearance of the eyelids?*

A In thyroid eye disease the upper lid is usually pulled up and the lower lid is pulled down giving abnormally wide eyes. If the eyes are pushed forward the wide open eyelids accentuate this and give a “staring” appearance. Surgery is available to correct the position of the upper and lower lids. This improves the overall cosmetic appearance of the eyes and it also protects the eyes more effectively and reduces discomfort.

Q *What can be done for double vision?*

A Double vision varies from person to person with thyroid eye disease. Most people have very mild or no double vision and no treatment is needed. If there is more marked double vision surgery can often improve it. The surgery aims to adjust the pull of the eye muscles to eliminate double vision as far as possible, especially in the straight ahead position and when looking down, for example for reading. Unfortunately it is often not possible to eliminate double vision completely in thyroid eye disease.

Q *What are the results of all these operations for the eyelids and for double vision?*

A It is the common experience of surgeons who deal with thyroid eye disease that the outcome of surgery is unpredictable. This means that sometimes two or even three operations are needed to achieve the desired effect.

Q *What is the long-term outlook in thyroid eye disease?*

A The majority of people who have this condition retain good vision and achieve good cosmesis with, or sometimes without, surgery. Although the effects of thyroid eye disease improve a little during the first few months after treatment of an overactive thyroid gland, there is little further improvement after this. It is at this stage that surgical options are usually considered.

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