



Weighed down by droopy lids?

Drooping eyelids can affect the visual field and cause tiredness and migraine



Amrita Kaur

When Madam R. Lim was in her teens, she realised her right eye was markedly smaller than her left. It did not bother her then, so she left it alone.

But in 2020, her right eyelid started drooping to a point where it seemed like she was winking.

"I had to rely more on my left eye to look. At times, I would also hold up my right eyelid for a few seconds, so I could look at a wider area, but it became tiring to do that," says the 67-year-old, a Silver Generation Ambassador who volunteers with seniors.

As Madam Lim's field of vision in her right eye was limited, she had to be extra careful when she moved about.

She went for community health screenings during the Covid-19 pandemic, and was referred to the National University Hospital (NUH) for an appointment. As it was deemed a non-emergency case, she underwent ptosis surgery only this May, after cataract surgery on both her eyes.

Ptosis refers to the drooping of the eyelid. Ptosis surgery tightens or shortens the eyelid muscle, so it can lift and open the eyelid adequately.

Since then, Madam Lim's quality

of life has improved. "I have better vision in my right eye and I can walk about more confidently," she says.

The condition drew some attention recently, when Malaysia's Deputy Prime Minister Zahid Hamidi was seen with swollen eyes in photographs.

His daughter, Ms Nurulhidayah Ahmad Zahid, said in an Instagram post that this was because her 70-year-old father had undergone eye surgery as his optic nerves were not functioning properly, resulting in droopy eyelids.

Doctors tell The Straits Times that ptosis repair is sometimes done in conjunction with blepharoplasty, surgery which tightens loose eyelid skin that results from the natural loss of collagen and elastin in the skin.

Dr Yvonne Chung, head and senior consultant at Singapore National Eye Centre's (SNEC) Oculoplastic Department, explains that blepharoplasty is done if the patient has excess skin covering his or her visual field.

However, if the patient has both excess skin and weakened eyelid muscle, blepharoplasty and ptosis repair would be required. She says patients typically do both.

There were 189 ptosis and blepharoplasty surgical operations done at SNEC in 2022, notes Dr Chung, of which 146 patients were above 60 years old.

"Naturally, with an ageing population in Singapore, the number of people with droopy eyelids will increase," she says. By 2030, about one in four citizens in Singapore will be aged 65 and above, up from one in six now.

However, she highlights that eyelid surgery is optional. "Not all require it even though their lids are droopy, as those who have poor blink response may risk worsening

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SILVER GENERATION AMBASSADOR R. LIM, 67

their dry eyes after eyelid surgery," she adds.

At Polaris Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery, consultant plastic surgeon and medical director Adrian Ooi says there has been a 10 to 15 per cent increase in the number of patients aged 55 to 65 undergoing blepharoplasty and ptosis repair at his clinic in the past three years.

Commenting on the rise, he says: "The population is getting healthier and more aware of quality of life. When they are still healthy with more time on their hands, they want to live their best lives."

HOW THE CONDITION CAN DEVELOP

Eyelids can droop as a person gets older.

"With age, one's eyelids stretch and the supporting muscles and tissues may weaken. As a result,

excess skin and fat may gather above or below the eyelids, causing issues such as heaviness, eyelid drooping, reduced vision or downward-pointing eyelashes that cause corneal irritation," says Dr Ooi.

Dr Gangadhara Sundar, a senior consultant at NUH's Department of Ophthalmology, says 80 per cent of patients who undergo blepharoplasty and ptosis repair are above 65 years old.

"There has been progressively a greater demand for visual improvement from droopy upper eyelids and eyebrows, as Singaporeans live longer and lead more active and productive lives," he adds.

The Covid-19 pandemic forced people to move their meetings online, which led to them noticing their droopy eyelids as they looked at themselves more on screens, says Dr Sundar.

People also sometimes receive comments from others about the appearance of their eyes, increasing interest in eyelid surgery, he adds.

Dr Ooi says common complaints from patients include always looking tired, blockage and darkening of the upper visual fields, headaches, and formation of forehead lines.

Patients, he adds, first notice the use of the forehead and brow muscle more in raising the eyelids due to compensation. This can lead to tiredness, ache in the forehead and migraine, especially at the end of the day.

"When this mechanism fails to help, the upper visual fields will be blocked. Some patients complain of a 'curtain-like' effect on the upper eyelids," says Dr Ooi.

In severe cases, the obstruction of the visual field can be bad enough to cause them to walk into low-hanging objects or affect their

ability to drive, he adds.

As droopy eyelids are worse when seniors gaze downwards, Dr Sundar says those who spend a lot of time on mobile gadgets often feel tired and fatigued.

NOT JUST A SENIOR CONDITION

Drooping eyelids, however, do not affect only seniors.

Children may have droopy eyelids from birth that may obstruct vision and result in poor visual development such as amblyopia, also known as lazy eye. This can happen if the levator muscle, whose function is to raise the upper eyelid and maintain the upper eyelid position, is poorly developed, says Dr Chung.

Young adults can develop droopy eyelids if they habitually overstretch their eyelids when inserting their contact lenses, rub their eyes or have undergone eye surgery, she adds.

Common eye issues such as styes and chalazions as well as tumours can also weigh down one's eyelids and cause them to droop, she notes.

Surgery usually involves both eyes so they look symmetrical, says Dr Chung.

However, the procedure may also be done on one eye for patients who have medical conditions affecting one side of the face, such as facial palsy, in which drooping, weakened eyelid muscle and skin cover part of the patient's vision.

"In such cases, we may choose to do blepharoplasty on one eye, possibly in conjunction with other surgical procedures such as a lower lid tightening or a face lift. The latter procedures are typically done by plastic surgeons," says Dr Chung.

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Madam R. Lim's right eyelid started drooping to a point where it seemed like she was winking. She underwent ptosis surgery in May at the National University Hospital to fix the issue. ST PHOTO: HESTER TAN



‘Patients can expect lasting results’

Young adults can develop droopy eyelids if they habitually overstretch their eyelids when inserting their contact lenses, rub their eyes, or have undergone eye surgery.
PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

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MEDISAVE CAN BE USED IF CRITERIA MET

These are usually medically necessary procedures, but certain assessments such as visual field tests are required to determine whether the patient can use MediSave, says Dr Chung, adding that doctors decide based on the criteria set by the Ministry of Health.

Patients who do not fulfil the criteria but choose to undergo the procedure for aesthetic reasons will not be able to use MediSave to offset the cost of the procedure, she adds.

For instance, she says blepharoplasty done for the lower eyelid, which removes or reduces eye bags, is cosmetic and not eligible for subsidy as eye bags do not affect vision.

In Madam Lim's case, it was a medical issue, and she could offset part of the surgery cost using MediSave.

The procedure takes 30 to 90 minutes depending on whether one or both eyes are done, with patients going home afterwards.

Dr Ooi says stitches at the upper eyelid are usually removed between five and seven days after the procedure. The swelling occurs mostly within the first couple of days. Patients are advised to avoid

wearing contact lenses and doing sports for a few weeks.

Complete recovery takes up to three months, say doctors.

Sometimes, Dr Sundar says, patients may have persistent droopy eyelids after surgery, or asymmetry between the eyes. In such cases, a minor procedure is done to fine-tune results, if desired by patients, he adds.

Says Dr Ooi: “Patients can expect to have lasting results, though the eyelids will still continue to age with time. We can reverse ageing, but unfortunately cannot stop the process.”

amritak@sph.com.sg