Dear Alice,

I find it relaxing, along with rubbing my face, to rub my eyeballs (with my eyelids closed, of course). It feels good to massage the muscles and squeeze out the air that builds up back there. Is this safe? Do I risk deforming my eyeballs and changing my vision?

Thanks,
Tense Eyeballs

Answer

Dear Tense Eyeballs,

On its own, a little corneal rub now and again is unlikely to cause any permanent damage. But your eyeballs are very sensitive organs and unlike your shoulder muscles, for instance, they may not be able to handle frequent massages.

One of the beauties of the human body, particularly the corneas (the clear, domed surface of the eyeball), is that they are well-equipped to repair themselves. However, giving your eyes repeated rubdowns may cause little scratches on your corneas and may lead to infection or irritation from chemicals or germs on your hands. These frequent repairs prompted by excessive eye rubbing may cause your corneas to thin and change shape, which could affect vision. As great as a shoulder massage may feel, in the long run, the same treatment may not be as therapeutic for your peepers.

If you notice that your eye rubbing is causing problems like ruptured blood vessels, pay close attention and consult a health care provider. Also, try to see if there is a pattern to your eyeball massaging. Do you rub your eyes because they feel itchy or dry? Do they feel more irritated during certain seasons? Allergies and different sensitivities to air conditioning or dry weather may make massaging your eyes feel especially satisfying. However, there may be other options that not only make your peepers feel better, but also pose fewer risks than giving them a good rub-a-dub.

Depending on the massage-inducing culprit, try eye drops that are specially formulated to treat
allergies or dryness. See if that helps. Even taking a few minutes away from your computer or books to relax your eye muscles may alleviate some of the discomfort you’ve been treating by rubbing your eyes. As with any treatment, it's a good idea to check with a health care provider before you start self-medicating. Visiting an ophthalmologist (eye doctor) may help you determine the health of your eyes and whether the rubbing is causing any damage. They may also be able to give you some alternatives to eyeball massage.

Until then, reserve the deep tissue work for your shoulders and spare your eyes.

Alice!

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