What is a subconjunctival haemorrhage?

It is a small bleed (haemorrhage) on the outside of the eye. The conjunctiva is a thin, clear membrane, similar to plastic wrap, that covers the white part of the eye and the inside of the eyelids. The bleeding which occurs just beneath this membrane is referred to as a subconjunctival haemorrhage; sub means “just beneath”.

What are the signs and symptoms?
The obvious sign is the small collection of dark-red blood over the white of the eye. It is painless, does not itch, does not affect eyesight or cause a problem with your health. In fact, most people do not notice the onset of the problem.

You may notice a slight swelling in the affected area.

What is the cause?
A subconjunctival haemorrhage may be caused by a minor injury such as being poked in the eye. However, in most cases there is no known cause — the bleed just happens out of the blue.

Blood vessels around the eye are rather thin and fragile and can bleed easily, especially in elderly people.

Subconjunctival haemorrhages may occur as a result of a sudden increase in pressure in the eye that can occur with coughing, sneezing, vomiting or straining at the toilet.

People on blood-thinning drugs (anticoagulants) are also at an increased risk of a bleed.

What are the risks?
Although the appearance of a subconjunctival haemorrhage can look rather frightening, it is not a serious problem. Your doctor can confirm the diagnosis. You should also see your doctor if you develop a haemorrhage in the eye after a severe head injury.

What is the outcome?
The blood will absorb gradually over 2-3 weeks. The colour will slowly change from beefy-red to brown or green before disappearing. There are no complications.

Is it caused by high blood pressure (hypertension)?
It is unusual to find hypertension in people who have a subconjunctival haemorrhage, which usually occurs in people with normal blood pressure.

Rarely, however, it may be related to hypertension and your doctor will usually check your blood pressure.

Can a bleeding disorder cause a subconjunctival haemorrhage?
Yes, occasionally a haemorrhage is caused by a bleeding disorder just as it can cause easy bruising. If your doctor suspects this they will arrange blood tests.

What is the treatment?
There is no special treatment. Eye drops and medicines are not helpful. Warm compresses do not help or hasten the healing but do no harm. The problem is best left to natural healing.