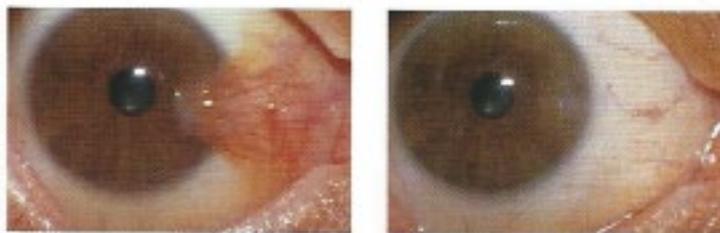


Pterygium

What is a pterygium?

A pterygium (pronounced te-ri-gi-um, plural: pterygia) is fleshy tissue that grows in a triangular shape over the cornea (the transparent part at the front of the eyeball). It may grow large enough to interfere with vision. A pterygium most commonly occurs on the inner corner of the eye but can also appear on the outer corner. A pterygium is not a cancer. People sometimes confuse pterygia with cataracts. A cataract is a clouding of the lens inside the eye and cannot be seen easily with the naked eye.



Eye with pterygium

and without

What causes pterygia?

The main cause of pterygia is exposure to ultraviolet radiation. Environmental conditions experienced in hot and dry climates may exacerbate the problem. Although anyone can develop a pterygium, they are more common in the northern parts of Australia and among people such as farmers and surfers who spend a lot of time outdoors.

Are pterygia dangerous?

Pterygia are not dangerous but they can look unsightly, cause discomfort and impede vision. If the pterygium grows on to the central part of the cornea, it can stretch and distort the cornea or begin to block light from entering the eye.

Although a pterygium is not dangerous, it should be checked to make sure that it is not something more serious. If you have any area of tissue on or around the eyes that changes rapidly, you should consult an optometrist or eye surgeon (ophthalmologist) immediately.

How can pterygia be treated?

In cases where the pterygium is not actively growing on to the cornea, protecting the eyes from ultraviolet light often will stabilise its growth. Sometimes, pterygia become red and irritated. When this occurs, eye-drops or ointments may soothe the inflammation. Your optometrist can suggest an appropriate product to use.

If a pterygium begins to grow on to the cornea and threatens to distort vision, surgical removal is required. Fortunately, this is relatively minor surgery that is usually performed under a local anaesthetic. It is best to have surgery before the pterygium progresses to the point at which it interferes with vision. Your optometrist can assess the pterygium and refer you to an eye surgeon if it requires removal.

How can pterygia be prevented?

The best way to reduce your risk of developing a pterygium is to protect your eyes from ultraviolet light. UV radiation can also cause cataracts and other eye diseases, as well as skin cancers, so reducing exposure is wise. The best ways of doing this are to:

- Avoid the sun, especially between 10 am and 3 pm.
- Wear a broad-brimmed hat that will reduce the amount of UV radiation reaching your eyes by about 40 per cent.
- Wear sunglasses. Look for sunglasses that meet Australian Standards categories 2, 3 or 4. Your optometrist can help ensure your sunglasses fit well and are comfortable to wear.