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## Pterygium

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### Summary

- A pterygium is a fleshy overgrowth of the conjunctiva that may affect one or both eyes.
  - Risk factors include excessive exposure to sunlight in people who spend time outdoors, and chronic eye irritation.
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A pterygium is a fleshy overgrowth of the conjunctiva, which is the thin clear membrane on the surface of the eye. About one in every 100 Australians develops a pterygium (the plural for pterygium is pterygia).

In most cases, a pterygium grows from the inner (nearest the nose) corner of the eye. It may sometimes grow from the outer corner or on both sides of the eye at the same time. One or both eyes may be affected.

The condition is not cancerous and does not invade the inside of the eye or spread to any other part of the face or body. It can look red and be mildly irritating.

If untreated, a pterygium may grow across the cornea (the transparent 'window' that covers the pupil and iris) affecting vision and becoming more obvious. In this situation, surgical treatment may be required. Pterygia may grow back despite successful surgery.

### Symptoms of a pterygium

A pterygium is usually painless, though it can cause irritation to the eye at any stage. The tissue is often triangular, pink and fleshy. Fine blood vessels may be visible.

If symptoms do occur, they may include:

- inflammation, including bloodshot whites of the eye on the side with the pterygium
- itching and burning sensations on the eye surface
- mild eye pain
- problems with vision if the pterygium grows across the cornea.

### Risk factors for a pterygium

Pterygia are known to be associated with the following:

- Sunlight exposure – pterygia are more common in populations near the equator and in people who spend a lot of time outdoors in hot weather. Excessive exposure to the ultraviolet radiation in sunlight is thought to be the cause.
- Dusty or sandy environments – long-term exposure in dry and windy locations is thought to contribute to the development of the condition.
- Age – risk increases with age. Estimates suggest that about 12 per cent of Australian men over the age of 60 years have the condition.
- A combination of factors – pterygium may be caused by a number of the above factors working in combination.

### Prevention of a pterygium

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Protection of your eyes from the ultraviolet radiation from sunlight is always important, and wearing UV-protecting wraparound sunglasses can protect from both the sun and dust.

## Diagnosis of a pterygium

A pterygium is diagnosed on its appearance. Generally, no other tests are needed. The optometrist or ophthalmologist can confirm the diagnosis with a special microscope used to magnify the view of the eye. If you think you have a pterygium, you should see your family doctor, or specialist ophthalmologist or optometrist.

## Treatment for a pterygium

Treatment depends on the severity of the condition. Options may include:

- **Protection against ultraviolet radiation** – if the pterygium is small, painless and not causing any vision problems, the optometrist may simply advise you to wear a hat and sunglasses when outdoors. Protecting the eye from ultraviolet radiation tends to stop the pterygium's growth. Wraparound sunglasses are recommended. Unlike regular sunglasses, which only shield the eyes from the front, wraparound sunglasses also shield against ultraviolet light shining in from the sides of the face. The optometrist will check your pterygium every one to two years to make sure it is not increasing in size.
- **Drops or ointments** – treatment for minor irritation may include eye drops or ointments to lubricate and soothe the cornea. For severe inflammation, an eye specialist may prescribe a short course of steroid eye drops. These medications only ease the symptoms and are not a cure.
- **Surgery** – is the only treatment that can remove a pterygium is surgery. The optometrist or doctor may refer you to an eye surgeon. It is preferable to remove the pterygium before it grows across the cornea. Otherwise, the pterygium may scar the cornea and cause permanent vision problems. You may also want to have the pterygium removed for cosmetic reasons.

## Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Optometrist
- Ophthalmologist (your doctor or optometrist can refer you)
- Eye surgeon
- Optometrists Association Australia (Victorian Division) Tel. 03 9486 1700

## Things to remember

- A pterygium is a fleshy overgrowth of the conjunctiva that may affect one or both eyes.
- Risk factors include excessive exposure to sunlight in people who spend time outdoors, and chronic eye irritation.

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Optometry Victoria

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