Summary

Flash burns are like sunburn in the eye and can affect both your eyes. A flash burn occurs when you are exposed to bright UV light. With the right care, your cornea will usually heal itself without leaving a scar.

A flash burn is a painful inflammation of the cornea, which is the clear tissue that covers the front of the eye. A flash burn occurs when you are exposed to bright ultraviolet (UV) light. It can be caused by all types of UV light, but welding torches are the most common source. That’s why it is sometimes called ‘welder’s flash’ or ‘arc eye’.

Flash burns are like sunburn in the eye and can affect both your eyes. Your cornea can repair itself in one to two days, and usually heals without leaving a scar. However, if the flash burn is not treated, an infection may start. This can be serious and may lead to some loss of vision.

Symptoms of flash burn

The symptoms of flash burn include:

- pain that may be mild to very severe, usually starting a few hours after the incident
- bloodshot eyes
- light sensitivity
- watery eyes
- blurred vision
- the feeling of having something in your eye.

Causes of flash burn

You can receive a flash burn after being exposed to UV (ultra violet) light. Sources include:

- welding torch
- direct sunlight
- reflection of the sun off water or snow
- sunlamp in a tanning salon
- some types of lamps, such as halogen or a photographer’s flood lamp.

Diagnosis of flash burn

Diagnosis requires an eye examination, which may include:

- anaesthetic drops – the doctor may use eye drops to numb your eyes. These drops work long enough to examine your eyes and should not be used regularly as they delay healing
- inspection – the eyes are checked for damage
- dye – the doctor may put orange dye in your eyes. This shows up any damage when a special blue light is used. The dye is harmless and washes out with your tears.

Treatment for flash burn

Treatment for flash burns may include:

- dilating drops – these are sometimes used to relax the eye muscles, which in turn eases pain and allows your eyes to rest and heal. Your pupils (the black part of the eye) will look bigger than normal. This effect lasts several hours to a few days.
- dressing – your eyes may be covered with a padded dressing to rest them and allow them to heal.
- do not drive with an eye patch on.
- antibiotics – you may be advised to use antibiotic drops or ointment at home to stop infection. Follow your doctor’s advice as to how often to use the prescribed eye drops or ointment. You may also be given a mild steroid-based anti-inflammatory drop
- review – you will be reviewed in 24 to 48 hours to make sure that your eyes are healing. Some problems, such as infection, don’t show up right away. If there are any serious problems, you will be sent to an ophthalmologist (specialist eye doctor).

Eye drops and ointments for flash burn
General suggestions for using eye drops and ointments include:

- Wash your hands before touching your eyes.
- Rest your finger on your cheek and pull down the lower eyelid.
- Tilt your head back and drop the liquid in behind your lower eyelid.
- For ointment, smear a small amount along the inside of the lower eyelid. Make sure that the nozzle doesn’t touch the eye.
- Continue with the treatment until your eyes have healed.
- Keep all drops and ointment in the fridge and out of reach of children.

**Taking care of yourself at home after a flash burn**

Suggestions include:

- Take pain-relieving medication such as paracetamol, ibuprofen or codeine. Check the packet for the right dose. The pain is likely to last about a day.
- Don’t wear contact lenses until your eyes have healed.
- Use artificial tears or lubricants to help any discomfort in your eyes. You can buy these products over the counter at most pharmacies.
- It is important to return for a check-up when your doctor advises.

**Seek urgent medical help for flash burn**

You should see your doctor or go to the nearest hospital emergency department if you are concerned about your eyes for any reason, or if you have symptoms including:

- blurred vision that is not due to eye drops or ointment
- worsening glare
- worsening pain.

**Prevention of flash burn**

Prevention is best. Suggestions for preventing flash burn include:

- Protect the cornea from UV light by wearing coated safety goggles, or wearing a welder’s mask when welding.
- Make sure the goggles are made to Australian Standards and cover the eyes completely.
- If wearing sunglasses for preventing flash burn, they should protect against both UVA and UVB radiation. Check the label when buying sunglasses.

**Where to get help**

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Emergency department of your nearest hospital
- Your GP (doctor)
- Ophthalmologist
- Pharmacist
- Optometrist
- WorkSafe Victoria, Tel. (03) 9641 1555 or 1800 136 089 (toll free) – for general enquiries
- WorkSafe Victoria Emergency Response Line Tel. 13 23 60 – to report serious workplace emergencies, seven days, 24 hours

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- talk to your doctor or pharmacist
- dial triple zero (000) in an emergency
- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

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More information

Eyes

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Eye basics
- Eye injuries and irritations
- Eye conditions
- Vision change and loss
- Vision aids and treatment
- Living with vision loss

Eye basics

- 10 tips for good eye health
  Most vision problems are avoidable or can be treated so have your eyes regularly checked by an optometrist or other eye care health professional...
- Eye care - optometrists
  A standard eye examination with an optometrist includes a screening for all common eye diseases, such as glaucoma and cataracts...
- Eye care - orthoptists

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Orthoptists assist in the diagnosis and treatment of eye disease.

- **Eye safety at work**
  Wearing eye protection appropriate for the task can significantly reduce the risk of injury.

- **Eyes - common problems**
  You can help prevent dry eyes and minimise the risk of tired or sore eyes while reading or using a computer.

- **Eyes explained**
  The eye's complicated design means that an image can pass through its many layers and end up crisply focused on the retina.

- **Eye tests**
  Regular eye tests or check-ups detect problems early, so you can have early treatment to minimise any permanent damage to your eyes.

- **Short-sightedness**
  If you are short-sighted, you will have trouble seeing objects clearly in the distance and they will appear blurry.

- **Smoking and eye disease**
  Smoking is thought to be a factor in age-related macular degeneration and blindness.

**Eye injuries and irritations**

- **Dry eye**
  A person suffering from dry eye syndrome does not have enough of the right kind of tears to keep the eye comfortable.

- **Eye floaters**
  Some eye floaters look like small dots, while others appear like threads or little hairy clumps.

- **Eye injuries - chemical burns**
  Always wear safety goggles or a face shield when handling liquid or powder chemicals.

- **Eye injuries - foreign body in the eye**
  Don't try to remove a foreign body from your eye - go to your doctor or hospital emergency department for help.

- **Eyes - blocked tear duct**
  Some babies are born with a blocked tear duct, but other events, including infection and trauma to the nose, can cause a blocked tear duct.

- **Eyes - flash burns**
  Flash burns are like sunburn in the eye and can affect both your eyes. Find out more.

- **Styes**
  Styes may be red and sore, but they generally do not cause any damage to the eye or eyelids.

**Eye conditions**

- **Blepharospasm**
  Blepharospasm means involuntary twitching, blinking, closure or squeezing of the eyelids.

- **Cataracts**
  A cataract of the eye is like the lens of a camera becoming fogged up.

- **Colour blindness**
  People who are colourblind can't see some colours or see them differently from other people. Colour blindness is inherited, and affects more boys than girls. Out of 20 boys, it is likely that one or...

- **Conjunctivitis**
  Conjunctivitis is an eye infection caused by a bacteria or virus. Symptoms include eye redness, a discharge and swollen lids. Conjunctivitis is treated with antibacterial eye drops or ointment.

- **Diabetic retinopathy**
  Without treatment, diabetic retinopathy can cause loss of vision and blindness.

- **Eyes - giant cell arteritis**

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Giant cell arteritis is inflammation of the arteries that can cause sudden blindness in one or both eyes.

- **Eyes - glaucoma**
  Glaucoma can happen at any age and without early detection can lead to permanent vision loss and blindness.

- **Eyes - optic neuritis**
  Optic neuritis is inflammation of the optic nerve that causes blurred, grey and dim vision.

- **Eyes - retinitis pigmentosa**
  Retinitis pigmentosa is the collective name for a range of diseases that damage the retina and cause vision to fade.

- **Eyes - trachoma**
  A clean face and clean environment are the best protection against trachoma.

- **Eyes - uveitis**
  Iritis can cause vision problems if it is not treated.

- **Pterygium**
  A pterygium is a fleshy overgrowth of the conjunctiva that may affect one or both eyes.

- **Retinal detachment**
  If a detached retina is not treated, it can lead to total blindness.

### Vision change and loss

- **Eyes - age-related macular degeneration**
  Age-related macular degeneration (AMD) is a type of vision loss where there is a distortion or absence of the central field of vision.

- **Eyes – long-sightedness**
  A significant amount of long-sightedness can lead to blurred vision, particularly for close objects.

- **Eyes – refractive errors**
  Refractive errors are common eye disorders causing blurry vision and are related to the focusing ability of your eyes.

- **Short-sightedness**
  If you are short-sighted, you will have trouble seeing objects clearly in the distance and they will appear blurry.

- **Vision loss - neurological**
  Neurological vision impairment (ABI VI) is vision loss caused by damage to the areas of the brain that are responsible for sight.

### Vision aids and treatment

- **Corneal transplantation and donation**
  Corneal transplant surgery would not be possible without generous donors and their families, who have donated corneal tissue so that others may see.

- **Eyes - contact lenses**
  Proper care of your contact lenses will help avoid irritation or damage to your eyes.

- **Vision therapy**
  Vision therapy is effective for everyone; however, its impact is greatest in children and young adults.

### Living with vision loss

- **Braille**
  Braille is a reading and writing system for blind and vision impaired people, made up of raised dots that can be "read" by touch.

- **Vision loss and sport**
  Many sports can be adapted to suit people who are blind or have low vision.

- **Vision loss - living with a guide dog**
  Guide dogs are intelligent animals that thrive on the challenge of helping their handlers.

- **Vision loss - occupational therapy**

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Occupational therapy for people with vision impairment offers new strategies and alternative ways to do things.

- **Vision loss - offering assistance**
  When you meet a person who is blind or has low vision, ask them if they want help.

- **Vision loss - recreational activities**
  Many recreational activities can be reworked to suit a person who is blind or has low vision.

- **Vision loss - safety around the home**
  There are many ways to improve home safety for people whose vision is deteriorating.

- **Vision loss - social events**
  With planning and preparation, most social events can be adapted to suit people with vision loss.

- **Vision loss - training guide dogs**
  Guide dogs are specially bred and trained to enable people who are blind or vision impaired to achieve freedom and independence.

**Related Information**

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**Home**

**Related information on other websites**

- eMedicine Consumer Health – Corneal flash burns.
- Flash burns – Eye injuries and farming, NJVDP.
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists.
- Worksafe Victoria.

**Content Partner**

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Royal Australian New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO)

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