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.

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

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.

### References

- Pterygium and pinguecula, North Shore Eye Centre. [More information here.](#)
- Pterygium, Eye Cancer Network US. [More information here.](#)
- Pterygium, Medline Plus US. [More information here.](#)

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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
  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...

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• 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.

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
  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
  Iris 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.

• Eyes - laser eye surgery
  During laser eye surgery, a computer-controlled laser is used to remove microscopic amounts of tissue from the front surface of the eye.

• 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
  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

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

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

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- [Optometrists Association Australia](#)

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