Pterygium

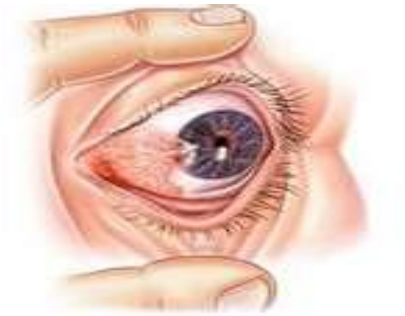
What is a pterygium?

A pterygium (pronounced te-ri-gi-um ~, plural: pterygia) is triangular-shaped lump of tissue that grows from the conjunctiva (the thin membrane that covers the white of the eye) on to the cornea (the clear central part of the eye). Pterygia often occur in both eyes, usually on the side of the eye closer to the nose. 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.

What causes pterygia?

The exact causes of pterygia are not known but they are strongly associated with exposure to ultraviolet radiation and hot, dry environments. 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?

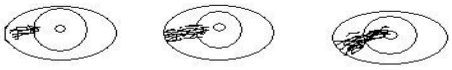


Pterygia are not dangerous, but they can look ugly and cause some discomfort. The main problem with pterygia is that as they grow on to the cornea they distort it, interfering with vision. If the pterygium grows on to the central part of the cornea, it can begin to block light from entering the eye. 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 an ophthalmologist immediately.

How can pterygia be treated?

In cases where the pterygium is not actively growing on to the cornea, protecting the eyes from ultra-violet light often will stabilize its growth. Provided it is not
threatening vision and it remains stable; this may be all that is required. When the pterygium is actively growing on to the cornea and threatening to distort vision, the only effective treatment is surgical removal. This is significant surgery, and in the hands of a skilled surgeon may require general anaesthetic. It can take some weeks to full recovery. 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 ophthalmologist if it requires removal.

How can pterygia be prevented?



Stage 1 Stage 2 Stage 3

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

- Avoid the sun; especially from 10 am to 4 pm.
- Wear a broad-brimmed hat that will reduce by at least half the amount or UV radiation reaching your eyes.
- Wear sunglasses: Wrap around sunglasses are best.