

# Pterygium

## What is a pterygium?

A pterygium (pronounced te-ri-gi-um, plural: pterygia) is a triangular-shaped lump of tissue which grows from the conjunctiva (a thin membrane which 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 – sun, wind and dust. Pterygia are more common in the Northern parts of Australia and among people such as farmers and surfers who spend a lot of time outdoors, but anyone can develop a pterygium.

## Are pterygia dangerous?

Pterygia are not dangerous, although they can look ugly and cause some discomfort. The main problem with pterygia is that as they grow on 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 through the pupil.

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. In many cases, provided it is not threatening vision and it remains stable, this may be all that is required.

In cases where the pterygium is actively growing on to the cornea and threatening to distort the vision, the only effective treatment is surgical removal. Fortunately this is relatively minor surgery which usually is performed under a local anaesthetic. It is best to have surgery before the pterygium progresses to the point where 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 generally is a wise move.

The best ways of doing this are to:

- Avoid the sun: in summer, three-quarters of outdoors UV exposure occurs between 10 am and 4 pm. Staying out of the sun between those times will significantly reduce your UV exposure.
- Wear a hat: a broad-brimmed hat will not only protect your head from sunburn, but will reduce by at least half the amount of UV radiation reaching your eyes.
- Wear sunglasses: a good pair of sunglasses will reduce the amount of UV reaching your eyes and cut the amount of glare. Wrap-around sunglasses are best as they block UV radiation - which can slip around the sides of conventional sunglasses - and reduce effects of wind and dust entering the eye.