

Pterygium

WHAT IS A PTERYGIUM?

A pterygium (pronounced tuh-RIJ-ee-um) is a wedge-shaped, scar-like growth on the white part of the eye. The white part is covered by a thin, clear layer called the conjunctiva. The growth can grow from the conjunctiva onto the cornea. The cornea is the clear front window that covers the colored part of the eye.

A pterygium often grows on the side of the eye closest to the nose. It is more common as people get older. It is also seen more often in people who live in sunny places near the equator. Too much sun, wind, or sand—especially during childhood and the teen years—can increase the risk.



Fig. 1: A pterygium is a wing-shaped growth that can spread onto the cornea.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF A PTERYGIUM?

A pterygium is damaged blood vessels and thick scar-like tissue. The most common cause is damage from the sun's ultraviolet (UV) rays. UV light can irritate and harm the conjunctiva over time. It is not an infection. It does not spread from person to person.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF A PTERYGIUM?

Small pterygia often do not cause symptoms at first. As they grow, they may cause:

- Dryness
- Redness
- Burning
- Itching
- A change in how the eye looks

Larger pterygia can blur vision. They can change the shape of the cornea and cause astigmatism (when the eye does not focus clearly). If the growth covers the center of the cornea, it can block light and cause vision loss.

HOW CAN A PTERYGIUM BE TREATED?

Artificial tears can help with irritation. If the symptoms are worse, anti-inflammatory eye drops may be used.

If the pterygium becomes large or affects vision, surgery can remove it. Sometimes the growth can come back after surgery.

To lower the chance that it will return, the surgeon may:

- Move healthy conjunctiva from another part of the eye to cover the area
- Use a special medicine during surgery
- Place a thin tissue graft over the area

WHAT ARE OTHER CONDITIONS THAT CAN LOOK LIKE PTERYGIA?

A pterygium can look like a pingueculum. A pingueculum is a yellow bump on the white part of the eye. However, it does not grow onto the cornea. It is also caused by sun damage.

In children, other growths on the conjunctiva can include a freckle (nevus), melanoma, or lymphoma. An eye doctor (ophthalmologist) should examine the eye to make the correct diagnosis.

HOW CAN A PTERYGIUM BE PREVENTED?

Prevention should start in childhood. Limiting sun, wind, and sand exposure can also help lower the risk. Protect the eyes by:

- Wearing a wide-brimmed hat
- Wearing sunglasses that block UV rays

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