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GENERAL INFORMATION

# PTERYGIUM

(Surfer's Eye)



vision  
eye institute

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# WHAT IS A PTERYGIUM?

**A pterygium (pronounced ter-ig-e-um) is a fleshy triangular growth that develops on the 'skin' of the eye (the conjunctiva), typically on the side closest to the nose. Pterygium means wing-shaped in latin.**

Pterygium development is most strongly associated with environmental factors, especially exposure to UV radiation. It's common in people who spend a lot of time outdoors in sunny and windy conditions, especially surfers. Hence the condition's other name – Surfer's Eye. Pterygia are also commonly seen in welders.

The condition is usually harmless but, if a pterygium grows across the cornea, it can cause scarring and sometimes loss of vision. The growth may also change the shape of the cornea, causing vision problems (e.g. astigmatism).

One or both eyes can be affected and it more commonly arises in people aged between 20 and 40. Men are more likely to develop a pterygium than women.

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**PTERYGIA ARE NOT CANCEROUS – THEY ARE BENIGN GROWTHS. WHILE THEY MAY GROW LOCALLY (AND POSSIBLY AFFECT YOUR SIGHT), THEY WON'T SPREAD TO OTHER PARTS OF YOUR BODY.**



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# HOW DO YOU TREAT A PTERYGIUM?

Treatment for minor irritation includes eye drops or ointments that help to lubricate and soothe the cornea. For severe inflammation, you may be prescribed a short course of steroid eye drops. These medications only ease the symptoms and are not a cure.

## Surgery

If the growth is significant and continues to spread across the cornea or causes vision problems, surgery is usually recommended to eliminate associated symptoms and avoid adverse effects on vision. In many instances, people choose to have surgery for cosmetic reasons.

Using modern micro-surgical techniques, the surgeon will carefully remove the pterygium. It is replaced with a graft of healthy tissue taken from the same eye, which is fixed into place using stitches and/or special glue. There is a chance that the condition may recur following surgery, but the process of grafting helps to prevent this.

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# HOW CAN YOU PREVENT GETTING A PTERYGIUM?

- Wear good-quality, wrap-around sunglasses that meet the Australian Standard and have an EPF UV rating of either 9 or 10.
- Wear sunglasses when surfing or playing water sports.
- Wear a wide-brimmed hat.
- Wear protective glasses/goggles with UV protection when welding.



# FAQs

## Is having a pterygium dangerous?

In general, a pterygium is not dangerous. During the early stages of pterygium development, the main concern is cosmetic and there is no effect on vision. In some cases, the pterygium may continue growing across the eye and either directly block vision or change the shape of the cornea and cause blurred vision (astigmatism). In these cases, surgery is recommended.

## Is a pterygium cancerous?

No, a pterygium is a benign growth and usually harmless. However, in some cases, it may harbour cancerous cells.

## What causes a pterygium?

It is not known exactly what causes a pterygium to develop, but dusty, sandy and sunny environments (with high UV exposure) are contributing factors.



**AUSTRALIAN RESEARCHERS HAVE FOUND THAT PEOPLE WHO HAVE A PTERYGIUM ARE NEARLY 25% MORE LIKELY TO DEVELOP MALIGNANT MELANOMA – A FATAL FORM OF SKIN CANCER.<sup>1</sup>**

Tell your GP or dermatologist if you have (or have had) a pterygium, make sure you protect your skin from the sun/UV exposure (i.e. sunscreen, long-sleeved tops, shade) and always have regular skin checks.

1. Crewe JM, Threlfall T, Clark A et al. Pterygia are indicators of an increased risk of developing cutaneous melanomas. Br J Ophthalmol 2018;102:496-501.

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# WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF A PTERYGIUM?

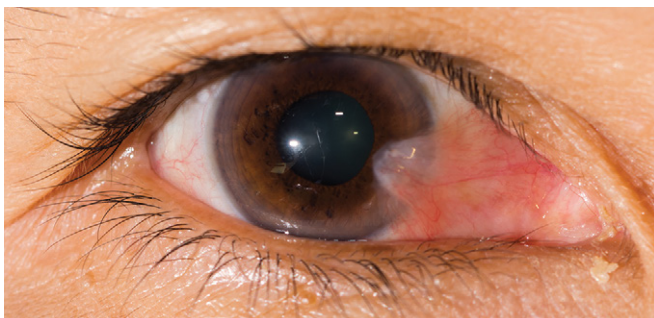
A pterygium can go unnoticed for many years, or it may be dismissed as a general irritation of the eye. As it progresses, it can start to spread across the cornea.

Common symptoms include:

- Localised redness
- Irritation
- Itching
- Foreign-body sensation
- Corneal scarring.

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**SOME PEOPLE WITH A PTERYGIUM MAY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO WEAR CONTACT LENSES.**



## How do you diagnose a pterygium?

Diagnosing a pterygium is usually straightforward using a slit lamp – a microscope with a bright, intense light that allows the ophthalmologist to examine the surface of the eye.

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## OUR PTERYGIUM CLINICS

For more information or to find a Vision Eye Institute clinic that treats pterygia, visit: [visioneyeinstitute.com.au/services/pterygium](https://visioneyeinstitute.com.au/services/pterygium)

This information is general in nature. All medical and surgical procedures have potential benefits and risks. Consult your ophthalmologist for specific medical advice.



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