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Pterygium

What is a pterygium?

A pterygium (ter-i-jee-yum) is a fleshy, wing shaped growth on the surface of the eye that starts on the white part of the eye and can progress to the corneal surface. Pterygia can grow over time. They often form on side close to the nose. They are caused by UV sunlight exposure over the course of a patient's lifetime. Pterygia are not cancerous.

What symptoms are associated with pterygia?

Many patients do not have any symptoms especially when pterygia are small, but if a pterygium gets inflamed, it can cause redness, irritation, and pain. Some thicker pterygia cause displacement of the tear film and dry spots form on the cornea. If the cornea is involved, the pterygium can cause astigmatism that is irregular and not well corrected by glasses or contact lenses, leading to blurry vision.

What is the treatment for pterygia?

For acute inflammatory flare ups, steroid eye drops and lubricating drops can be used. However, there are no drops to cure a pterygium. If it is causing symptoms, it can be removed surgically. First, the portion over the clear cornea is peeled free and the underlying scar tissue is smoothed away. The conjunctival portion (visible on the white of the eye) is cut away. In order to minimize the risk of recurrence, a chemical called Mitomycin-C may be used along the edges from where the abnormal tissue was removed. The opening left after removing the pterygium is then covered with a graft, which further decreases the risk of re-growth. The preferred graft material is your own smooth, clear, normal conjunctival tissue from the top of the eyeball (under the upper lid). If there is scarring or a very large area, a special amniotic membrane graft can be used instead. The graft is secured with tissue glue and/or sutures, which makes the recovery less uncomfortable for most people. The eye will be numb during the outpatient surgery. A patch and shield will be placed on the eye after surgery. You will see the doctor the day after surgery for evaluation and instructions on drops and restrictions. Restricted activity is advised for 1-2 weeks, and most patients recover in approximately 6-8 weeks.

How can I prevent my pterygium from recurring?

The techniques above for grafting and Mitomycin C can help decrease recurrence. Sunglasses are critical for UV protection, especially in the postoperative period.