

EYE-Q

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Pinguecula and Pterygium are not Actors in a Greek Tragedy

A pingueculum (pin-GWEK-u-lum) is a benign growth on the conjunctiva (thin outer tissue coating of the eye). It looks like a thickened area of tissue and is often cream colored though it may be whitish or slightly pigmented. Typically they do not have blood vessels on their surface but block the blood vessels underneath them from view. If they do have blood vessels then you may have a pterygium (ter-IJ-e-um). A pterygium is a wing shaped growth on the conjunctiva that starts in the corner of your eye and extends onto the cornea of your eye.

These growths typically are the result of exposure of the eyes to harsh irritants such as wind, dust, damaging chemicals and ultraviolet rays of the sun. The greater your exposure to these irritants the greater the risk of developing these growths. For this reason they are far more common in tropical regions than in northern regions due to the increased exposure to the sun's UV rays.

For the most part these growths are symptom free. However, if you do have symptoms they are most likely to be redness, inflammation, irritation, a dry or gritty feeling, itching or burning and/or blurred vision.

Treatment of pinguecula and most pterygia is aimed at relieving the symptoms. A quality artificial tear and cool compresses help greatly. Eliminating the offending irritant by wearing sunglasses with UV filters, a visor or brimmed hat and avoiding the wind by wearing some form of protective eyewear are all helpful. In addition, good ventilation when working around irritating chemical fumes is important. If these things don't help or the symptoms are getting worse then it is important to see your eye doctor for additional treatments or medicines.

Pterygia are a greater threat to vision than the pinguecula. A pterygium may continue to grow onto the surface of the cornea and threaten your vision by blocking the light from entering your eye or distorting the surface of the cornea causing blurred or distorted vision.

Pterygia that distort or block the vision can be treated with surgery done under a local anesthetic. The surgery involves removing the growth and placing a specially prepared tissue and medication on the eye to help with the healing. Without the use of this tissue and medication, there is better than a 65% chance that the pterygium will return. Using these techniques reduces the chance of the pterygium returning to 10-15%.

Because the pinguecula is small and non-growing it is generally not recommended to remove it, as redness and scarring may be worse than before the surgery. In addition, the

pinguecula has a greater chance of developing into a pterygium, which can threaten good vision.

If you are concerned about how a growth on the eye looks or if it should become dark in color or irregular in shape it is best to see your eye care provider for an evaluation. The frequent use of a quality artificial tear to lubricate and moisturize the eye in addition to UV blocking sunglasses is always a good practice when outside and will reduce the chance of ruining a great weekend from sore painful eyes.

As a special Holiday treat be sure to look in the late night sky tomorrow evening for a total lunar eclipse. It will start around 1:30 am EST and continue until approximately 5:00 am EST. The maximum point of the eclipse will occur around 3:15 to 3:20 am EST. This eclipse is unique because it will occur at almost the same time as the Winter Solstice. This means the moon will be at its yearly brightest in the night sky prior to being totally blacked out by the Earth's shadow. This particular type of eclipse will not occur again until 2094 so it is a must see experience. Just be sure to bundle up nice and warm.

To all of my readers and patients I want to take this opportunity to wish you a very Merry Christmas and a Joyous New Year.

If you have questions about your eye health e-mail Dr. Barowsky at doctom@tdkj.com and we'll try to answer your questions here at Eye-Q.