

# Pinguecula and Pterygium

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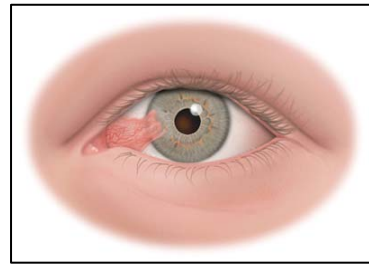
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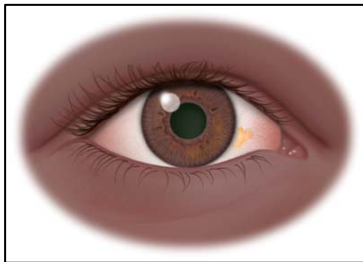
## Overview

Pterygia (plural) and pingueculae (plural) are benign growths on the conjunctiva, the membrane that covers the white part of the eye and the underside of the eyelids.

A **pterygium** is a fleshy, wing shaped, growth, containing scar-like tissue and blood vessels. These growths start on the conjunctiva and spread over the cornea (the clear front dome of the eye). If they grow large enough they can affect your vision. They usually develop on the side of the eye closest to the nose. People in their twenties to forties are most likely to develop pterygia.



Pterygium



Pinguecula

A **pinguecula** can develop when normal tissue thickens. These growths may grow close to the cornea but they do not grow over it. Pingueculae are most common in older people.

## Symptoms

Pterygia and pingueculae can cause similar symptoms that include:

- A yellowish, raised bump on the conjunctiva
- Irritation
- Dryness and soreness
- Inflammation
- Redness
- Sensation that something is in the eye

- Eye watering
- Light sensitivity

Unlike a pinguecula, a pterygium -- especially a large one -- can affect your vision, either by causing astigmatism (a defect where vision is blurred), or by growing into the center of the cornea.

## Screening and Diagnosis

Most pingueculae and pterygia can be seen with the naked eye. However, we will confirm the diagnosis with an eye exam.

## Causes and Risk Factors

We don't know what causes these growths to develop. However, too much exposure to sunlight may play a role in both conditions. Other potential causes include irritation from dry air, dust, smoke or wind. These factors will also make existing symptoms worse. If you live in a hot climate and/or spend a lot of time outdoors you are also more likely to develop pingueculae and pterygia.

If you have immediate family members with pterygia, you may also be more likely to develop these growths.

## Treatment

### *Pingueculae*

In many cases, no treatment is necessary unless the area becomes inflamed. A pinguecula does not usually grow onto the cornea or threaten sight. However, it is important to see someone in our department so that we can confirm that it is a pinguecula and not something more serious. We can also evaluate whether the pinguecula could be a symptom of an underlying medical condition, for example, Gaucher's disease, which is an inherited metabolic disorder where fatty substances accumulate in the spleen, liver, and bone.

We might prescribe steroid drops to reduce redness and irritation. You can also use over-the-counter drops (artificial tears) to keep your eyes wet and relieve irritation. Occasionally, we may also recommend anti-inflammatory drops.

We will ask you to come in again if your eyes are still red and irritated after a week of treatment or if you have trouble seeing, double vision, or any other change in vision.

### *Pterygium*

If you have a small pterygium, you may not need any treatment. Most pterygia can safely remain in the eye without causing any harm and they often stop

growing on their own. If the area becomes inflamed or irritated, we might recommend that you use over-the-counter artificial tears to keep the eye moist and comfortable. If the eye becomes very inflamed or irritated, however, we might prescribe a short course of steroid drops.

We also recommend that you wear sunglasses with side panels (sometimes called wrap-around sunglasses). These provide 100 percent UV protection when you are outside.

### ***Surgical treatment***

In most cases a pterygium can safely remain in the eye. However, if a pterygium grows very large and begins to threaten your vision, or causes unbearable irritation, we might recommend surgically removing it.

During surgery, we will remove the pterygium, and then take additional steps to prevent it from regenerating. To prevent regrowth, we usually take a graft of normal conjunctiva from the top of the eye and move it to the area on the white of the eye where the pterygium used to be. This creates a barrier that prevents the pterygium from growing back. We might also apply mitomycin, an anti-tumor drug, during, or after, surgery to inhibit regrowth.

### **Getting your care at KP**

Let us know if your pterygium or pinguecula is growing significantly, or if you are experiencing persistent severe irritation or any change in your vision.

You can make an appointment with your primary care physician or an Ophthalmologist in our department by calling our call center (415) 833-2200. The call center can also put you through to an advice nurse if you need immediate advice about your eyes. Our advice nurses are available 24/7.

You can also email your doctor through our [Web site](#). Once you have registered for a user ID, you can look at your prescription information, lab results, summary from previous doctor's visits as well as send a message to your physician.