

PINGUECULUM

A pingueculum (pin-gwek-you-lum) is a tiny (pinhead size) yellowish-brown growth on the white part of the eye. It consists of fatty tissue that has tiny blood vessel embedded in it. The size depends on the amount of fat, and the color depends on how obvious the blood vessels are. A pingueculum is not cancerous and it has nothing to do with cataracts. It may occur in one or both eyes.

What causes a pingueculum?

No one really knows why pingueculae form. They are most common in sunny, dry climates, and often seem more prominent with age, though they can occur as early as the late teens. They are probably related to years of exposure to wind, dryness, and sun.

Characteristics

Most people first notice a small yellowish or pinkish lump on the white part of the eyeball. It may grow larger for a while and become darker or more reddish in color. It often stops growing after reaching a certain size, but will appear larger when it is irritated and inflamed. Smokers may find that the smoke aggravates a pingueculum. Other irritants include atmospheric pollution, wind, dust, and chemical fumes. After the irritant is removed, the pingueculum gradually resumes its previous, less obvious appearance.

Once in awhile, a pingueculum continues to grow. Some doctors believe it may lead to a pterygium (tuh-ridge-ee-um), which can grow onto the surface of the cornea. If you have a pterygium, you will be told. Otherwise you should not be concerned.

Treatment

A pingueculum that is not irritated or inflamed requires no treatment. If it is mildly irritated, decongestant eye drops (available over-the-counter) may clear

up redness. However, do not use them more than four times a day on a regular basis, since overuse sometimes causes a flare-up (rebound) of the congestion and redness when the drop is stopped. If severely inflamed and irritated, the pingueculum may be treated with a cortisone (steroid) eye drop for a few days. You must not use these for any longer than you have been instructed. Such drops can cause serious side effects, so their use must be carefully monitored.

Surgical removal of a pingueculum is seldom necessary, but is an option if the appearance bothers you a great deal. However, the scar left after surgery is sometimes as noticeable, or even more so, than the pingueculum itself.