Patient information

Corneal Abrasion

Emergency Department

What is a corneal abrasion

The cornea is the clear tissue that covers the front of your eye. It is the eye's main focusing surface. Light passes through the cornea to the back of your eye, allowing you to see. A corneal abrasion happens when the surface of the cornea is scratched or damaged. If the nerves beneath the surface are exposed, your eye can become painful.

Causes

A corneal abrasion is a scratch or injury to the surface of the cornea, the clear layer at the front of the eye. It is a common eye injury and can be caused by foreign bodies such as dust, sand, or small particles becoming trapped in the eye, accidental scratches from fingernails, paper, plants, or tree branches, blunt trauma such as being struck by a ball or other object, or problems related to contact lens wear.

Symptoms

Symptoms may include severe eye pain, a gritty feeling or sensation that something is in the eye, watering, redness, sensitivity to light and blurred vision.

Treatment

Your eye will be examined by a doctor or a nurse using a slit lamp microscope to assess your injury (a local anaesthetic drop to numb the area may be needed to do this).

The treatment you are given will depend on the size and depth of your corneal abrasion. You may be given antibiotic ointment which will be put into your eye and maybe a pad will be placed over your eye. This allows your eye to rest and prevents the eyelid from rubbing away the new cells that are repairing your cornea.

Will treatment hurt?

The antibiotic ointment or eye drops may briefly sting when applied, particularly if the abrasion is severe. This is normal and should pass quickly.

After the eye pad is removed, the eye drops may leave your pupil enlarged and your vision slightly blurred. These effects can last for at least four hours.

Using your eye ointment or drops at home

Use any prescribed antibiotic eye drops or ointment as directed and finish the full course, even if your symptoms improve.

Please note: that standard NHS prescription charges apply to all medications.

Returning to work and driving

You should not drive, operate machinery or return to activities that require clear vision until your sight has returned to normal. If you have been given an eye pad or your vision is affected by eye drops, you should not drive.

Recovery

Most corneal abrasions heal within two to three days and vision returns fully, provided the scratch is superficial and no secondary infection develops. Continue using any prescribed ointment for as long as your doctor advises.

In a small number of cases, the healed surface may not attach firmly to the cornea and can stick to the eyelid overnight. It may then tear when you open your eyes on waking or when your eyes move rapidly during sleep. This is known as recurrent corneal erosion syndrome.

Treatment may include long-term use of lubricating eye ointment and, occasionally, laser treatment.

Seek medical advice if your pain returns, your vision becomes blurred or worsens, or you develop increasing redness, discharge or sensitivity to light.

When to seek emergency advice and help

You should seek urgent medical attention if you develop worsening eye pain, increasing redness, sensitivity to light, reduced or blurred vision, a persistent feeling that something is stuck in your eye, or if your symptoms do not start to improve within 24 to 48 hours.

Future prevention

To reduce the risk of future eye injuries:

- Wear appropriate eye protection when carrying out DIY, gardening, sports or using power tools.
- Follow contact lens hygiene advice carefully.
- Avoid rubbing your eyes, particularly if you feel there is something in them.

Contacting the team

If you have any questions about your care during your visit, please speak to a member of the nursing or reception team.

If you would like this leaflet in another language or format, or you would like to give feedback on your care, please contact our patient experience team at paht.pals@nhs.net