

CORNEAL ABRASIONS

The cornea is the clear front window of the eye. It covers the colored portion of the eye, much like a watch crystal covers the face of a watch. The cornea is composed of five layers. The outermost layer is called the epithelium.

A corneal abrasion is an injury to the epithelium. Abrasions are, painful. Common causes of corneal abrasions include problems from contact lenses, fingernails, paper cuts, tree or bush limbs or rubbing of the eye. There are some eye conditions, such as dry eye, that may make injury more likely.

The corneal surface usually heals within a day or two, but the eye may be very uncomfortable while it is healing. Tearing, light sensitivity and the feeling that something is in the eye-"foreign body sensation"-will accompany even a small abrasion.

TREATMENT

A common treatment is to patch the scratched eye, thus preventing the blinking eyelid from moving over the healing area. Another common treatment is repeated application of ointment to the eye, which forms a soothing layer between the inner eyelid and the abrasion. Antibiotics are often used because of the small risk of infection. Sometimes a drop is used to dilate the pupil to help with pain associated with light sensitivity. Even after the surface has healed, the cornea may still be sensitive to wind and dust. Often, additional lubrication is helpful, both during the day and at bedtime, until the sensitivity has disappeared. Some other diseases, such as dry eye or diabetes, may slow healing.

CORNEAL EROSION

A corneal erosion is a spontaneous breakdown of the epithelium sometimes at the site of an earlier abrasion. The symptoms are similar to a corneal abrasion: foreign body sensation, tearing and light sensitivity. These symptoms may vary, are often unpredictable and may occur upon awakening. An erosion, may occur when the eyes are dry or irritated.

TREATMENT

Several treatments are used to alleviate the discomfort of erosions and to speed healing:

- lubricating drops and ointments;
- drops or ointments containing salt;
- a special contact lens used to bandage the cornea;
- micro-puncture of the epithelium;
- removal of the damaged epithelium.

Recurrent corneal erosions can be stubborn and frustrating. Your ophthalmologist may be able to identify other contributing factors. Your attention to extra lubrication for the cornea is often the key to ending the erosion cycle.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS?

If bacteria get into the tissues under the protective corneal epithelium, infection or corneal ulcer can occur. These can be very serious and may cause loss of vision in the eye. Anesthetic drops relieve pain but may keep the eye from healing properly if used repeatedly.

WHAT IS THE USUAL OUTCOME?

Usually the corneal erosion or abrasion will heal within a week. Sometimes however, the erosion can recur if the epithelium is disturbed or the eye is rubbed, which can frequently occur upon awakening. In the majority of cases corneal erosion will heal completely. Proper care by you and your ophthalmologist is necessary to help prevent serious consequences.