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Corneal Abrasions

What is a corneal abrasion?

A corneal abrasion is a cut or scratch on your cornea. The cornea is the clear, protective window at the front of your eye. It lies directly over the colored part of your eye (called the iris).

What can cause a corneal abrasion?

Many things can cause a corneal abrasion, such as sand, dust, dirt, wood or metal shavings that get in your eye. The cornea can also be scratched by a fingernail, a tree branch or a contact lens. Rubbing your eyes very hard is another way that an abrasion can occur. Sometimes, if a corneal abrasion hasn't healed properly, it can come back weeks or months after the original injury. In some people, the outer layers of the cornea are weak. These people may get a corneal abrasion for no apparent reason.

How do I know if I have a corneal abrasion?

The cornea is very sensitive, and a corneal abrasion is usually quite painful. You may feel like you have sand or grit in your eye. You may notice tears or blurred vision, or your eye may look red. You may also notice that light hurts your eye. Some people get a headache when they have a corneal abrasion.

What do I do if I get something in my eye?

If you think something has gotten into your eye, first try to wash out the eye by splashing clean water into it. Your workplace may have an eye rinse station for this purpose. Sometimes, blinking or pulling the upper eyelid over the lower eyelid may remove a particle from under the eyelid. Avoid rubbing your eye. If you or someone else notices something on the white part of your eye, use a soft tissue or cotton swab to gently lift it out of the eye. Don't try to remove something that is directly over the cornea—this might cause more serious damage. If you can't remove the particle or if there doesn't seem to be anything in your eye, call your doctor.

What will my doctor do for a corneal abrasion?

Your doctor will examine your eye for any damage or particles that may be trapped under your eyelid. A yellow-orange dye may be placed on your eye to help your doctor see the abrasion. Your doctor will probably treat the abrasion with eye drops or ointment. Most small abrasions heal within one to three days. You may need to return to your doctor for another exam the next day.

What if I wear contact lenses?

If you wear contact lenses, you need to be especially careful with a corneal abrasion because you have a higher risk of infection. Your doctor may tell you not to wear your contact lenses for a few days if you're treating your eye with medicine.

How can I prevent corneal abrasion?

Take the following steps to help prevent corneal abrasions:

- Wear protective eye goggles when you're around machinery that causes particles of wood, metal or other materials to fly into the air (such as a chainsaw or a sandblaster).
- Cut infants' and young children's fingernails short.
- Trim low-hanging tree branches.
- Use care when putting in contact lenses.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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