

What is a foreign body?

A foreign body is any abnormal substance or object that does not belong in the body (in this case, does not belong in your eye). Foreign bodies in the eye may include a speck of dust, wood chip, metal shaving, grass clipping, insect or a piece of glass. Most foreign bodies are found under the eyelid or on the surface of your eye.

Those most at risk are tradespeople, such as labourers, woodcutters, gardeners, fitters and turners and boilermakers.

What are the symptoms?

- A 'feeling' of something being in your eye.
- A sharp pain in your eye, followed by burning and irritation.
- Your eye is watery and red.
- You have a scratchy feeling when you blink.
- You have blurred vision or loss of vision in the affected eye.
- You are more sensitive to bright lights.

Once the foreign body is removed, symptoms should ease.

Why is a foreign body a problem?

Most injuries are minor and, with the right treatment, heal without problems.

If the foreign body is not removed from your eye, it can cause an infection and scarring.

A metal object will react with your eye's natural tears and this can lead to rust forming around the piece of metal. This is seen as a dark spot on the white of your eye and can cause a scar that may affect your vision.

A foreign body may scratch the surface of the eye (*corneal laceration or abrasion*). This can happen with a glancing blow from a finger, paper, twig or stone. With the right treatment, most corneal abrasions, even large ones, heal within 48 hours. Sometimes a scratch may not heal. An *ulcer* (a defect on the surface of the eye) may form, which can affect your vision.

Bleeding into the 'whites' of your eye (*subconjunctival haemorrhage*) can also occur. Often this is harmless and goes away without treatment, but if it is caused by blunt trauma to the eye, you should seek medical assessment.

An object that pierces your eye and enters your eyeball can cause serious injury and even blindness.

Treatment

Your doctor or nurse will check your vision and any foreign body will be gently removed. Your eye may be washed in saline (sterile salt water) to flush out any dust and dirt. Sometimes an X-ray is needed to see if an object has entered your eyeball.

The doctor or nurse may put a patch over your eye, which allows it to rest and any scratches to heal. Take the patch off when you get home or as instructed.

Pain medication, such as paracetamol, may be helpful if your eye is sore. Speak to your pharmacist or health care professional if you have questions or concerns.

Home care

- Do not drive with an eye patch on as it can be very difficult to judge distances properly and is dangerous.
- Avoid working with machinery.
- You may be advised to use antibiotic drops or ointment to prevent or stop infection. Follow your doctor's advice as to how often to use them.
- Wash your hands before using drops or ointment on your eyes.
- To use drops or ointment, rest your finger on your cheek and pull down the lower eyelid. Tilt your head back and drop the liquid in. For ointment, smear a small amount along the inside of the lower lid. Make sure that the nozzle does not touch the eye.



- You need to continue the treatment until the eye has healed.
- Keep all drops and ointment in the fridge out of reach of children. Some drops contain agents that damage contact lenses. Do not use contact lenses until you finish your eye treatments.
- You may have some discomfort in the eye when you get home. Take a painkiller that contains paracetamol (such as *Panadol* or *Dymadon*). Check the packet for instructions.

Prevention

- The best way to prevent this happening again is to protect your eyes.
- Do not stand or walk near anyone who is grinding or drilling.
- Always wear safety glasses when working in dusty or windy areas, such as when mowing, gardening or using machinery. These activities can produce flying debris, which may lodge in the eye. Safety glasses or goggles should be close fitting with side shields. Regular sunglasses or corrective glasses are not enough.

First aid

If you get something in your eye again, wash your eye with water or saline. Do not try to remove a foreign body yourself. Go straight to your doctor or nearest hospital emergency department for help.

Follow up

The doctor may want to see you again, or you may be referred to your local doctor or *optometrist* (eye specialist), to check that your eye is healing and that your vision is okay. You should not miss this appointment. Even though you may feel better, your eye may still not have healed fully. The follow up is needed to make sure that the treatment is working. If there are any serious problems you will be sent to an *ophthalmologist* (specialist eye doctor).

Notes:

Seeking help



In a medical emergency go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



See your local doctor or health care professional if:

- you have increasing pain and watering of the eye 24 hours after the object has been removed
- your vision is getting worse 24 hours after the object has been removed (such as blurriness or 'blind spots')
- you are concerned for any other reason.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

If you would like to receive this publication in an **accessible format**, please phone 9096 0578 or email edfactsheets@health.vic.gov.au



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