Something in your eye

What is a foreign body?

The medical term for something in your eye is foreign body. This could be anything from a speck of dust, seed, any plant material, wood chip, metal shavings, glass, or even small insects. Foreign bodies can move around, be stuck on the surface of the eye or found under either eyelid.

Anybody is at risk but particularly those working in situations where cutting or grinding occurs, such as building sites.

What are the symptoms

Most foreign bodies cause you to blink and rub your eye. Try to avoid rubbing your eye. A lot of the time the foreign body will be washed by tears to the corner of your eye and no longer be a problem.

You will have symptoms if the foreign body remains in your eye or scratches the surface of the cornea (the clear part of the eye).

These symptoms are pain when you blink or move your eye if the lid is closed and the feeling of something in the eye. The eye may become red and tears will flow. If the foreign body is big enough or in the line of sight then you may have blurred vision or be sensitive to lights.

Are foreign bodies a problem?

Any foreign body or foreign body sensation may indicate an abrasion of the cornea which can lead to infection and scarring if not treated. When you are seen by a doctor they will nearly always prescribe or give you antibiotic drops or ointment to use after they have removed the foreign body or diagnosed a corneal abrasion. The majority of injuries will heal with no problems with this treatment.

If the foreign body is metal the salty tears will make it rust and the rust ring can remain even when the foreign body is removed.

Depending on where this is it may need to be removed by a clinician. Some foreign bodies, such as those from high speed power tools, can penetrate the eyeball and these can have serious consequences.

Treatment

When the clinician sees you they will test your vision with the same chart you are tested on for your driver's license.

Your doctor or nurse will put some anaesthetic drops in your eye. This stings for a moment, and then the pain should go away. The eye can then be examined more thoroughly and any foreign body removed. The foreign body can be removed with a variety of methods, such as washing the eye, using a cotton wool bud under direct vision or using a needle with a binocular device, such as a slit lamp, to give the clinician a better view.

If there is suspicion of a metal foreign body going into your eye special X-rays will be done.

Antibiotic drops or ointment such as chloramphenicol will be put in your eye. Apply these antibiotics to your eye as directed by your clinician. This is usually 4 times a day. Continue for a day after the symptoms resolve and for at least 3 days.

Pain medication by tablets will be useful as the local anaesthetic used will wear off after approximately an hour and your eye can be very painful. Local anaesthetic drops cannot be used at home.

Patches are now not used for corneal abrasions or after foreign body removal as they do not enhance healing or reduce pain.

If you wear contact lenses then do not wear them until you have a clearance to do so by your doctor.

How to apply eye drops and ointment

Drops: Tilt head back, open your eyes and pull down the lower lid.

Keep staring at the dropper and squeeze gently.

Hold the drops in your opposite hand and rest this on the bridge of the nose to get the right height. The drops go into the pocket between the lower lid and the eye.



Ointment: Pull down the lower lid and lay a bead of ointment along the lower lid.

Do not touch the tip on the eye or touch the tip with your hands.

Blink once or twice and keep your eyes closed for a minute.

Preventative measures

Use extreme caution when using high speed power tools, or doing other activities where objects can fly into your eye.

Always wear full eye protection-this means goggles or safety glasses, not sunglasses or reading glasses.

Seek medical attention for eye injuries or suspected foreign bodies.

Precautions

Do not drive or use machinery as your distance judgement may be impaired.

Pain medications as well as the pain itself are distracting and you will be safest resting at home.

First Aid

If this happens again, wash your eye with water. Do not try to remove a foreign body yourself.

Go to your local doctor.

Follow up treatment

Follow-up appointments are very important.

You may be referred to an ophthalmologist or asked to see your local GP.

If your eye does not appear to be getting better after 2 days seek further medical attention.