



Media Statement

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Pterygium a red flag for melanoma, major new study shows

A person with a pterygium on the eye is 24 per cent more likely to develop malignant melanoma of the skin, a new Western Australian study has revealed.

Researchers from the Lions Eye Institute (LEI) examined almost 24,000 WA patient records of hospital-treated pterygium from 1979 to 2014 and found a strong link between the eye condition and melanoma - the most deadly form of skin cancer.

Australia has one of the highest rates of pterygia in the world. It's estimated that 1.1 per cent of Australians have a pterygium, but this rises to 12 per cent in men over the age of 60.

LEI researchers found the average age for pterygium surgery was 49 years and 64 per cent of those treated were male.

Pterygium – commonly known as surfer's eye - is a fleshy growth on the surface of the eye which can cover the pupil and lead to vision problems. It is caused by excessive exposure to sun, dust or wind but is not cancerous and treatment usually involves protection against ongoing exposure to ultraviolet radiation (UVR) or ointments where there is eye irritation. Surgery is an option in some cases.

But despite its standing as a benign condition, LEI researchers now say it is a major red flag for skin cancer.

Professor David Mackey, who co-authored the research and is also Managing Director of the LEI, said knowing the link between the two “gives us a possible tool for early detection of melanoma – as the pterygium may appear many years before the melanoma. In this study, 66 per cent of melanomas were diagnosed after pterygium surgery.

“Health professionals who see patients with a developing pterygium are well placed to alert these patients to the increased risk of developing melanoma, to recommend lifestyle changes and to promote regular skin checks because early detection of melanoma can save lives,” he said.

In Australia, melanoma incidence rates have been steadily increasing, with 15 per cent proving fatal.

Professor Mackey said although the link between solar UVR and pterygia was well established, it would also be important for researchers to define safe UVR exposure limits for Australians that balanced the maintenance of adequate Vitamin D levels and potentially reduced the risk of myopia (short-sightedness) while minimising the incidence and mortality from melanoma.

The research paper – *Pterygia are indicators of an increased risk of developing cutaneous melanomas* - was published in the *British Journal of Ophthalmology* last month. The full study can be found at

<http://bjo.bmj.com/content/early/2017/08/25/bjophthalmol-2017-310686.long>

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Image: Example of a pterygium extending across the surface of the eye