

In the Blink of an Eye: corneal abrasions

Sand and specks of dried seaweed fly into the air. Your kids are on  the beach shoveling their way to China. “Watch out!” you yell. “Watch those shovels! The ocean is big. The beach is big. You don’t need to be right on top of each other. There is plenty of sand for everyone.”

You sigh and go back to counting snacks and unearthing buried flip-flops. You look back at the kids. Aw, you think to your self, they look so cute. Just as you reach for the camera, the idyllic moment is shattered. Your youngest is holding his eye and everyone, even the kid who threw sand into the injured child’s face, is crying.

Quickly you grab a water bottle and flush the irritating granules out of his eye. Satisfied nothing is left, you ask, “Does that feel better?” Your child ruefully nods, and resumes holding his eye. An hour later his eye is still watering. What next?

With any eye injury, pain, watery eyes or visual changes are all reasons to seek medical care. In this case, the sand or a little wood chip probably caused a scratch on the outer layer of the eye. This layer, called the cornea, heals very quickly. But like a scratch on any part of the body, the major potential complication is infection.

The most common way for health care providers to find a scratch on the cornea is to place a dye (fluoresceine) into the injured eye. This dye glows under black light. The dye pools wherever there is a depression or scratch on the eye. Pictured here is a photo of a child I saw in the office the other day. The scratch is marked with an arrow. If an abrasion is found, your child’s doctor will prescribe antibiotic eye drops to prevent infection. Placing a patch over the eye has not been shown to hasten healing. However, for comfort, some children prefer putting on an eye patch for a day.

It’s a good thing our eyes are set back in our skulls, otherwise, we’d

constantly have scratches on our eyes. Despite any precautions you may take, accidents still happen. Years ago a nurse I knew accidentally rolled over in bed and scratched her spouse's eye with her diamond engagement ring. Imagine explaining that to the in-laws.

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