No-stitches approach speeds, simplifies eye-surgery recovery

Biologic glue, rather than stitches, makes healing faster and more comfortable after eye surgery, according to a study presented April 13 to the World Cornea Congress in Washington, D.C., by Dr. John Hovanesian, a physician in practice at Harvard Eye Associates in Laguna Hills.

Surgeons at Harvard Eye Associates studied patients having surgery to remove pterygium, a noncancerous growth on the white of the eye.

Pterygium most commonly appears on the edge of the cornea (the clear front part of the eye) and fans out toward the nose.

It appears as a yellow or pink fleshy growth.

Pterygium is primarily caused by sun damage and is especially common among surfers, boating enthusiasts and others who spend much of their time exposed to ultraviolet light.

"Not everyone with a pterygium requires surgery," Dr. Hovanesian said, "but when the growth becomes large enough, the eye becomes red and uncomfortable and eyedrops often don't provide much relief. At this point, surgery is the only option."

Dr. John Hovanesian

In order to prevent regrowth of the pterygium following surgical removal, a thin graft of healthy tissue is removed from under the upper eyelid and placed over the area where the growth was removed.

In the past, stitches were the only way to hold the graft in place.

Harvard Eye Associates conducted the study because conventional pterygium surgery, while very successful, was also very painful. Most of the pain, the surgeons knew, was caused by the stitches.

For years, people would suffer with discomfort and redness to avoid the pain of pterygium surgery.

"The glue used in the study was originally developed for use in heart and lung surgery, but it is ideally suited to the delicate work we do in the eye," Dr. Hovanesian said.

In the study, he and his colleagues, Drs. Diana Kersten, Edward Kim and Roger Ohanesian, performed pterygium surgery on 49 patients and surveyed them afterward about pain.

Only 4 percent reported moderate to severe pain, compared with nearly 40 percent of patients having traditional surgery with stitches.

Not only was pain dramatically reduced but the surgery was one-third faster with glue instead of stitches. Additionally, none of the patients treated with glue experienced a regrowth, compared with up to 10 percent of patients using stitches.

The surgeons at Harvard Eye Associates are beginning to incorporate biologic glue into several other procedures, including corneal transplants.

Drs. Hovanesian, Kersten, Kim and Ohanesian can be reached at 949-951-2020. To learn more, visit www.harvard-eye.com.