

Take the drama out of eye trauma

What do you do if someone in your group damages their eyes in the bush? **DR ZORAN ALEKSIC**, an eye surgeon and refractive laser eye specialist, gives some important pointers.

A 4x4 family adventure in the Kgalagadi can turn into a nightmare if your toddler walks into the sharp end of a fishing rod, or the New Year's champagne cork hits your cousin in the eye. But there are ways to deal with eye trauma effectively, even if

you're far from medical support, says Dr Zoran Aleksic from Cape Town. Below, he explains exactly what to do about eye trauma while you're on holiday in a remote area. These are some of the most common eye injuries and diseases. Here are the do's and don'ts to remember until you can get professional help.



Dr Aleksic has extensive experience in ocular trauma and has worked

in the Eastern Cape, KZN, at Groote Schuur hospital and the Red Cross Children's Hospital in Cape Town. Follow him on social media using the handle @DrZAleksic or visit www.eyesurgery.co.za

SHARP OBJECTS

If a sharp object gets into the eye, for example if someone walks into a branch, it will, in most cases, result in a corneal abrasion – a superficial but painful scratch on the cornea. You feel like you can't open your eye and every blink feels like a piece of sandpaper is rubbing

over it. But it's often not a very serious injury, and if you treat it correctly, the superficial layers of the cornea will regenerate themselves.

What to do:

- Make sure nothing is stuck in the eye.
- Apply a thick layer of lubricant (see the Emergency Kit info box)
- Patch the eye, first with

gauze and then with a hard plastic eye patch, making sure the eye is properly shut behind the gauze (for a video on how to patch an eye correctly, visit our website www.eyesurgery.co.za).

- Keep the eye patched for 24 hours, only removing the cover temporarily to put more lubricating drops in (you should do this regularly).



SEVERE UVB EXPOSURE

If you spend too much time in bright sunlight without proper eye protection, the exposure to severe UVB light will mimic what is known as arc-eye (suffered by welders) or snow blindness.

What to do:

- Apply thick lubricating drops.
- Rest. You'll recover quickest with your eyes lubricated and shut, so go to sleep and wait. It will get better.
- Get a good pair of dark polarized sunglasses. It will prevent this from happening again.

What not to do:

It's not exactly convenient when you're out looking for the Big Five, but don't stay in bright light if you start experiencing severe UVB exposure. You'll only make it worse.



These products serve only as an example.

PUT THIS IN YOUR EMERGENCY KIT

- **A THICK LUBRICANT**
(like Xialin Night, Refresh Liguigel or Teargel)
- **GAUZE**
- **COTTON BUDS**
- **A HARD PLASTIC**, see-through eyepatch
- **MICROPORE TAPE**
- **ANTIHISTAMINE DROPS**
(like Patanol, Emadine, Zaditen or Relestat)

What not to do:

If the incident happened at a high velocity, it might be a penetrating eye injury or laceration.

- Do not apply pressure to the eye.
- Do not apply a gauze patch. Simply cover the eye with a hard plastic see-through patch.

This is an emergency and you need to get your closest emergency unit right away.

BLUNT TRAUMA

This happens when your fishing buddy's sinker (or that champagne cork) hits you in the eye. Blunt trauma can result in a corneal abrasion (see Sharp Objects section) or, in a more serious case, a severe injury that leads to bleeding in the eye.

In this case, you might be able to see tiny blood sediment in front of the iris.

What to do:

- Rest.
- Get to an eye specialist within a day or two.

What not to do:

Avoid excessive physical activity.

CHEMICAL BURN

A chemical burn to the eyes happens when someone gets stuff like battery acid or a strong cleaning detergent in their eyes.

What to do:

- Remember the 3 I's : Irrigation, irrigation, irrigation.
- Wash the eye with tap water for 15 minutes continuously (save your precious long-life milk for coffee later. Water does the trick).
- Apply a thick lubricant.
- Take out any hard chemical particles that might have reached the eye: Take a soft cotton bud and wet it with water. Then gently touch the particle with the cotton bud and sweep it from the eye.

What not to do:

Do not patch the eye until you can get to your closest ER unit.

If you're unsure of the type of injury you're dealing with, take a good quality photo and MMS or email it to your doctor.

CONJUNCTIVITIS

This is commonly known as "pink eye". It can be caused by a virus (viral conjunctivitis) or by an allergic reaction to things like contact lenses, contact lens solution, pollen, animal hair or dust (allergic conjunctivitis). Sufferers will have red, watery and irritated eyes. It's uncomfortable and could lead to a slight light sensitivity, but it's not severely painful.

VIRAL CONJUNCTIVITIS

What to do:

Allow your body's own immune system to fight the virus before you apply any drops. It will usually clear within 10 days without any treatment.

What not to do:

Viral conjunctivitis is highly contagious. Don't share towels and prevent immediate contact between the sufferer and other people on the trip.

ALLERGIC CONJUNCTIVITIS

What to do:

- Remove the allergen that you are reacting to.
- Wash both eyes and your face with cold water.
- Apply antihistamine drops.

What not to do:

If you are experiencing similar symptoms to allergic conjunctivitis but it gets progressively worse, with a yellowish discharge, you might be developing a secondary bacterial conjunctivitis. Get to an eye doctor. You'll need a prescribed antibiotic drop.