

Conjunctivitis

Information Sheet

What is it?

Conjunctivitis (also known as pink eye) is one of the most common and easily treatable eye infections. It is an inflammation or infection of the conjunctiva, the clear membrane lining the eyelids and covering the white part of the eye. It can affect both children and adults but the bacterial form of conjunctivitis is especially common in children under five years old.

Conjunctivitis is not a notifiable disease under the Health Act 1956 however Public Health can help if there is an outbreak of this illness in an institutional setting, e.g. a childcare centre, school or rest home.

How does a person become infected?

The illness can be caused by a bug (normally a virus or bacteria), allergies, blocked tear ducts or a reaction to chemicals/dust getting into the eye. Bacterial and viral forms of conjunctivitis are very contagious. If your child attends an Early Childcare Centre or a school they have a higher risk for infection. A person with the infection is able to spread it while they have discharge from the eye.

Conjunctivitis can be spread through:

- contact with discharge from the eye of an infected person
- surfaces or items such as toys, towels and flannels that have been touched/used by a person with the infection
- fingers rubbing the eye or other things such as towels and flannels which carry infected discharge
- in some cases, nose and throat secretions may also be infectious, particularly if the conjunctivitis is caused by a virus.

What are the signs and symptoms of the illness?

- Redness in the whites of the eye
- A scratchy feeling, like sand in the eye
- Pain and/or itchiness in the eye
- Tears
- A yellow or green discharge (pus) which makes the eyelids stick together
- Swelling of the eye lid
- Sensitivity to light
- Cold-like symptoms may occur with viral conjunctivitis

The symptoms can develop quickly over 24 to 72 hours and may last from 2 days to 2-3 weeks.

How bad is it?

Conjunctivitis can be serious as it can cause long-term damage to a person's sight if it is left untreated. If the infection is caused by bacteria, antibiotic ointments or drops from a pharmacy can be used to treat it. Eye drops may also soothe viral infections and prevent further infection. You may need anti-allergy medicine or drops.

You should see your doctor urgently if:

- You/your child's infection is not improving with treatment recommended by a pharmacist
- You/your child is having significant eye pain, sensitivity to light (photophobia) or any blurred or reduced vision
- Your newborn baby has swelling, redness or a pus-like discharge from the eye
- You/your child has any injury to the eye such as being hit or scratched

Conjunctivitis can recur, particularly if treatment instructions are not followed or if the full course of antibiotic treatment is not completed.

Will I need time off school, childcare or work?

Children should not attend early childcare centres or school until the redness and discharge from the eye has cleared, this is because the discharge is so infectious. Adults and teens do not need to stay away from work but will need to remember to wash their hands thoroughly if they touch or itch their eyes.

How do I avoid the illness and reoccurrences?

Good hygiene can help prevent the spread of conjunctivitis, to both eyes and to other people. This includes:

- keeping hands away from the eye
- washing hands frequently, and before and after any contact with the eye
- regularly and thoroughly disinfecting frequently touched areas such as door handles, tables and toys
- using a separate flannel, towels and bed linen and washing these frequently
- not wearing eye cosmetics during the course of infection
- replacing eye cosmetics frequently and after an eye infection
- following the manufacturers and/or opticians instructions for proper use and care of contact lenses
- staying home from early childcare centres or schools if eyes continue to have a discharge and are weeping

For further information please contact:



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