



Conjunctivitis (Pink Eye)

Conjunctivitis is redness and inflammation of the membrane (conjunctiva) that covers the eye and lines the inner surface of the eyelid. Pink eye is a common infection in young children.

School health and childcare provider information

Cause

Viruses, bacteria, allergies, eye injuries, or chemicals.

Symptoms

Includes redness, itching, pain, and discharge, depending on the cause. Bacterial conjunctivitis can sometimes be distinguished from other forms of conjunctivitis by a more purulent (pus) discharge. Conjunctivitis may affect one or both eyes.

Spread

Touching the secretions from the eyes, nose, or mouth of infected persons.

Incubation

It takes about 1 to 12 days after exposure for symptoms to begin, usually 1 to 3 days.

Contagious period

While symptoms are present for bacterial and viral conjunctivitis. If treated, until 24 hours after starting antibiotics. Allergy, eye injury, or chemical acquired conjunctivitis are not contagious.

Exclusion

Childcare and School

No exclusion unless the child has a fever or is not healthy enough to participate in routine activities. Antibiotics or a note from a health care provider are **not** required. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends considering conjunctivitis like the common cold – both diseases are easily spread among children, and both resolve without treatment.

Diagnosis

Recommend that parents/guardians call their health care provider if their child is a newborn or has redness of eyes and/or eyelids with pus and/or fever or eye pain.

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Treatment

If a bacterial infection is diagnosed, antibiotic treatment is available. Antibiotics may shorten the duration of illness minimally – most children with conjunctivitis recover after 5 or 6 days without antibiotics. The role of antibiotics in preventing spread of conjunctivitis is unclear. If the infection appears to be viral, no specific antiviral treatment is usually needed.

Prevention

- Cover nose and mouth when sneezing or coughing. Use a tissue or your sleeve. Dispose of used tissues in the trash.
- Encourage children not to rub eyes. Keep child's eyes wiped free of discharge. Avoid contact with eye drainage. Wear gloves when administering eye drops/medications or use a cotton-tipped swab to apply medication to the eyes.
- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water after contact with eye drainage.
Thorough handwashing is the best way to prevent the spread of communicable diseases.
- Do not share any articles that come in contact with the eyes, such as towels, washcloths, eye makeup, contact lens solution, or eye drops.
- Clean and sanitize mouthed toys, objects, and surfaces at least daily and when soiled (see Section 2).

For more information, call Hennepin County HSPHD-Epidemiology at (612) 542-5230 or call your local health department.

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