

What is conjunctivitis?

Conjunctivitis means inflammation (redness and soreness) of the clear covering of the white parts of the eyes and the inside of the eyelids (conjunctiva).

What causes conjunctivitis?

Infections - common bacteria and viruses, often the same ones that cause a cough or cold can cause conjunctivitis. This is why people often get conjunctivitis when they have a cough or cold.

Allergy - this is common in people with hayfever, eczema or asthma when they are exposed to things like pollen, dust or animal fur. People often complain of intense itching of the eyes. It often persists for many weeks, recurs during the summer months every year or recurs every time the person is exposed to the trigger.

Irritants - such as chlorine in swimming pools, smoke or fumes can cause irritant conjunctivitis.

What are the symptoms of conjunctivitis?

- One eye may be affected but it often spreads to involve both eyes.
- The whites of the eyes look pinker or redder than usual.
- There may be a mild discomfort or the eye may feel gritty but it is not usually painful.
- The eyelids may be slightly swollen.
- There may be a sticky discharge or the eyelids may be stuck together particularly on waking up.
- There may be mild blurring of the vision due to the discharge, but this normally clears on blinking. Vision is not usually affected.

Do I need treatment?

Infective Conjunctivitis is a self-limiting condition. This means that it will usually clear up on its own without any treatment within 7 days.

Antibiotic drops or ointment are not usually necessary.

Latest research has shown that children with infective conjunctivitis who are not treated with antibiotic eye drops recover as quickly as those children given antibiotics and are not any more likely to develop serious complications (ref 1).

General Advice

- Bathing the eyes with cotton wool soaked in cool clean water can help soothe the eyes and remove the sticky discharge.
- Infective conjunctivitis is contagious - to help prevent spread to other members of the family, wash hands regularly, particularly after touching the eyes and avoid sharing towels and face cloths.
- Avoid wearing contact lenses until symptoms have fully cleared.
- If allergic conjunctivitis is suspected - avoidance of triggers such as animal fur and pollen (by closing doors and windows on high pollen count days) can help. Anti-allergy eye drops may be helpful and can be bought over the counter or obtained from your doctor.

When should I see a doctor?

As conjunctivitis usually clears up on its own and doesn't require treatment it is not usually necessary to consult a doctor.

However if any of the following symptoms/situations occur it is important to seek advice:

- Your child has conjunctivitis and is less than 4 weeks old
- There is pain in the eye (rather than the usual mild discomfort which occurs with conjunctivitis)
- The vision is affected
- The symptoms do not start to improve within a few days
- There are spots or blisters on the skin surrounding the eye
- There is redness and swelling in the face around the eye

Ref 1. Peter Rose et al. Chloramphenicol treatment for acute infective conjunctivitis: a randomised double-blind placebo-controlled trial. *The Lancet* 2005;366: 37-43.

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Information for Patients and Parents

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