

CONJUNCTIVITIS

What is it?

This is an infection of the covering of the eyeball and inside of the eyelid. The white of the eye and the inner surfaces of the lids are covered by a transparent membrane called the conjunctiva. Conjunctivitis is a condition that causes the surface of the conjunctiva to become inflamed. Viruses, bacteria, allergies or foreign bodies can cause this inflammation. It is a very common condition, particularly among children. It is usually a self-limiting disease, which means that it will often resolve without any specific treatment.

What are the symptoms?



Conjunctivitis of the right eye

Picture courtesy of the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, Public Health Image Library:
<http://phil.cdc.gov/phil/quicksearch.asp>

The white of the eye may appear red or pink, and there may be a discharge, which causes the eyelids to stick together, making them difficult to open. The eye may feel gritty and sticky, particularly first thing in the morning. Light might cause pain in the eye and increase the watery discharge.

Is it infectious?

Yes, conjunctivitis is commonly spread from person to person by direct contact with the discharge from the eye. Within a playschool area conjunctivitis spreads as the affected child often rubs their eye due to the irritation. Following this contact, objects such as toys, crayons or surfaces they touch may become contaminated, providing the opportunity for the infection to spread to the next child having contact with the object. For this reason it is essential that staff are told that a child is suffering from conjunctivitis. Staff can then take preventative action to reduce the risk of further transmission including:

- discouraging close facial contact between infected and non-infected children;
- discouraging the child from rubbing their eyes (if they do rub their eyes encourage thorough hand washing);
- ensuring particular attention to hand washing and making sure that a separate towel is provided for the affected child / only paper towels are used.

What is the incubation period?

The incubation period and period of infectiousness depends on the cause of the conjunctivitis but may range from 1-12 days, depending on the organism and treatment given.

What can I do to help my child?

- when cleansing the eyes use separate wipes for each eye using clean tissues or gauze swabs and cooled, previously boiled water;
- clean the unaffected eye before the infected eye;
- do not share eye drops or ointments between family members;
- avoid using contact lenses while the infection is present;
- discourage the child from rubbing their eyes;

- lubricant eye drops may reduce discomfort and they are available over the counter in pharmacies;
- seek advice from a local pharmacist if the symptoms persist for more than a few days;
- if eye drops or ointment are this should be applied only following thorough hand washing by the parent or carer;
- only use drops / ointment prescribed for the affected eye, e.g. do not use drops for the right eye in the left eye if both are affected.

What can I do to stop conjunctivitis spreading to others?

- **pay particular attention to hand washing ensuring that the affected child uses paper towels or has a dedicated hand towel which should be washed / changed daily;**
- do not share flannels;
- discourage close facial contact between children while affected;
- advise the teacher or carer of your child of their condition;
- in community settings such as playgroups, nurseries or schools any outbreaks of conjunctivitis should be reported to your local Health Protection Team (see contents page for telephone numbers). An outbreak is defined as two or more children affected at the same time with the condition.

Should my child stay away from school, nursery or childminder?

Children should not routinely be excluded from school during the course of conjunctivitis.



Should the child see a doctor?

- a doctor or health visitor should be contacted if a baby under three weeks of age develops symptoms of conjunctivitis. This may require treatment with antibiotics as this infection can be acquired during birth from the mother's vaginal passage;
- if the condition is getting worse and the eye becomes more painful or very red;
- if vision becomes impaired;
- If the child develops discomfort on exposure to light
- if the treatment is not working after a prescribed course has been completed.

NHS Direct will be able to give information and advice by telephone on: 0845 4647.



Alternatively, see the NHS Direct website at: <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/>

or NHS Choices www.nhs.uk/Pages/HomePage.aspx

